

Artist Talk: Mark Bradford

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Dallas Museum of Art
Horchow Auditorium

Charles Wylie: The lights go down and it is time to start. Welcome to the Dallas Museum of Art, where we will be hearing from Mark Bradford, a featured artist in *Private Universes*, an exhibition curated by my colleague María de Corral who was our Hoffman Family Senior Adjunct Curator for Contemporary Art for a number of years and this is her latest manifestation of curatorial massing together of wonderful objects, and the emphasis this time being on an intense subjectivity rather than any kind of broad over-reaching themes.

When you go up to the galleries, which I trust you have or will after Mark's talk, you will see Mark's painting. It's kind of hard to miss. And I will read out the title because it's a long one and we're just talking about it and it's an amazing one and if anyone knows the source to it, we would love to hear it: *A Truly Rich Man Is One Whose Children Run Into His Arms When His Hands Are Empty*, from 2008 and it's on loan to us from the collection of Marguerite Steed Hoffman.

Mark is one of the most exciting, intriguing painters working today -- artists working today -- in the United States or indeed, the world. And I'm not going to talk to you much about his work because he will do that himself, but I'm just going to crib a little from the Carnegie International catalog: "Rich multilayered surfaces of the work emerge from a process of collage and a wonderful bringing together of literal material from the streets with an incredible formal sensibility and intelligence." And a wonderful freshness to the work that has intrigued me since I first saw it.

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He is a graduate of the California Institute of Arts in both his BFA and MFA. He has been featured in Prospect.1 New Orleans 2008 and *Life on Mars*, the Carnegie International that just closed, and the Whitney Biennial of 2006. He's had solo exhibitions at the Whitney Museum of

American Art and REDCAT, Los Angeles. And his work is on view right now in the Punta della Dogana, the François Pinault Collection, a foundation in Venice. And other group shows have been at the LA County Museum of Art, the New Museum, the Hammer Museum and Walker Art Center, Minneapolis. He is a recipient of the Bucksbaum Award from the Whitney Museum and the United States Artists Fellowship and a mid-career survey being organized right now by the Wexner Center at Ohio State University with a national tour that is planned.

We try to do programs around our exhibitions and bring in artists as often as we can, as often as our resources allow. I'd like to thank Lisa Kays for having arranged this so beautifully. And when we got together to decide who was going to be one of the better choices, who we would like to see come to Dallas, Lisa immediately said Mark Bradford. And I think we will see why after the talk. I also wanted to thank the lenders to the exhibition, all of our lenders here who are in the audience, as well as Michael Jenkins who is here from New York, who is Mark's dealer from New York. So, please join me in welcoming Mark Bradford to Dallas.

[Applause]

[00:04:00]

Mark Bradford: Always why I agree to this lecture is because they have the coolest hydraulic podium. Have you ever seen that? I mean, look at that. It's like rims. Because I'm so tall, everything has to be kind of adjusted. And I'm 6'8. Let's just get that out of the way. Let's get that out of the way.

So, thanks to the Dallas Museum for bringing me here. It's always nice and it's nice to have people show up. I appreciate each and every one of you getting up, leaving your houses and wherever you were to come out. An artist appreciates that because what you're doing is really just sharing your ideas. Well, you're kind of sharing your private universe and actually I like the name of that show because so much of my work has to do with public and private things that go on in public space but also at the same time are private. And so much of my work, I think, really has to do with relationships and memory and archeology.

And so I'm just going to kind of take you through some of that and just talk and show you images and talk and show you images. And the first image is actually of clothing line. I've been doing a series of sculptures

and this is just the referent. And I would pull all this clothing line off of the paintings and it sort of accumulated in my studio and, so, just one day I just kind of topographically took a photo, looking down on it. And so I liked it because it almost looked like spaghetti. It looked like hair. It looked like detritus. It looked like a lot of information, but what really kind of struck me was the complexity of it, the depth of it. So, I just thought I'd start with that.

[00:05:55]

Well that's interesting.

Okay. It's my fifth grade art teacher. She's good. I still know her by the way. She's 85. I knew her in fifth grade and we kept a relationship going. She's actually my first art teacher and the last art teacher that I ever had. Oh, I know why this slide's in here. I asked her for a picture of herself and she gave me a picture of—she loved that. She's 85 now and she gave me a picture when she's 18. She's like, "that's me!"

[Laughter]

She was the Spellman beauty queen. This is the Howard University homecoming. And she was very influential in my life. She was the first person that sort of took a contemporary view of art. She didn't give us macaroni and glitter. She really, really challenged us—even in fifth grade—to kind of use our imaginations. And I do a lot of teaching. I don't work in a university, but I believe strongly in getting children early into a contemporary conversation about art. So afterschool programs and doing something at the Getty, I did a teachers conference. And she has been a very strong influence throughout my life and I'm sure if I would have asked her to come, she would've flown, but she can't fly anymore, but she would have and she would have been standing up now, taking many a bows but—

So this is actually another photo that's interesting to me. My mom, which you will see early in my work, I think, early... I was raised in Los Angeles and we had a series of hair salons. You call them hair salons now, but we call them beauty shops. That's what we call them. And my mother was a hairstylist and my grandmother was a hairstylist as well. And so my work has so much to do with bleeds and relationships and how one thing moves from another. My whole career and my whole life is very fluid.

One thing just bleeds into another. There's no really hard breaks. Even in my paintings I just go to from one painting to another and my process changes very slowly.

And this picture really struck me because we look so much alike. And this is my mom in 1950 and she was doing hair in the kitchen and I was actually working in a hair salon and actually, I think I just finished CalArts and I put my self through CalArts working in a hair salon.

[00:08:07]

And so it makes sense that early on my work—it wasn't really race-based because I'm black. Duh! It's kind of evident when I look in the mirror that I'm black, but I think that I had a strong bent for aesthetics and for class. I'm very much interested in the kind of the relationship between class and aesthetics. So, when I first left CalArts, I was still working in the hair salon and economically I just didn't have much money and I actually wanted to work.

The first things that I turned to are the things that I understood on sort of a working basis and this is the beauty supply where I would get the products to color hair, to perm hair. And so my visual vocabulary, I think, started also to overlay my working vocabulary. I just collapsed them. People all over the world are industrious, using what's at hand and turning that into so many different things. So this is just a beauty supply across the street from where I worked and also, it looks like sort of an abstract painting.

And the thing I was very much interested in, too, we always had hair salons in South Central. And as soon as I say the word South Central, this imagery comes up that I call "commercial gold." The way in which it was constructed in early '90s of what South Central means: gangster rap and drive-bys, and sort of criminality. Well, South Central was just like any other neighborhood. It has good and bad like every other neighborhood. But we've always had hair salons in South Central, but I grew up in Santa Monica which is about 30 minutes away. It was all white, so—I had no problem going between the two communities.

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And so I thought, is it possible to go to South Central, have studio in South Central, work out of South Central and abstract it? Is it possible for me as an artist being black to go to South Central and not want to talk about this sort of, oh God, you know, obvious, obvious kind of stereotypes? Is the art world going to allow me to do that? And those are the questions I kind of ask myself. It's sort of like a woman, "can I be a feminist and be married?" "These are questions that you ask yourself. You sort of, am I working myself into a box or am I kind of breaking new ground? Can I abstract it? And I think I was beginning to think about those things with looking at products and looking at them abstractly.

One of the first things I started working with was something called endpapers. Endpapers are the things that—these were tissue paper that you use to give a perm. And I noticed there was a real strong translucent quality about them. And so I started to singe them with a blow-dryer and burn the edges. And the reason why I burned the edges is because I couldn't see them when they were translucent.

And these are early. I can look and see that there was probably hair color for dyes and endpapers and I started making these kind of almost Agnes Martin-feeling syncopation, early abstraction works. And I was really interested in abstracting the kind of visual landscape and at the same time really developing a formal painting practice, just not using paint. I was always attracted to paper because paper is sort of how information is transferred and I love the feel of paper and the history of paper. So this is called—I think this is *Biggie, Biggie, Biggie*, and I was very much interested in repetition and I was using such a narrow material pallet and *Biggie* is--it was actually a line from Biggie Smalls, but I was interested in the sort of emphasis: biggie, biggie, biggie, daddy, daddy, daddy, money, money, money, something that repeats itself over and over again, almost like Philip Glass and that kind of minimal music that he produces, sort of process repetition. And this is a close up of it.

[00:12:05]

Jheri Now, Curl Later. It's funny that working in hair salon you would hear all these little funny stories. I was working very late. A Jheri curl is simply a body perm. We just call it a Jheri curl, but it's a body perm. But late at night, I was working with Pearl and she was taking the rods out. It was really obvious that it wasn't curled. And I said, "It's not curled." And she

said, “Look, Jheri now, curl later. I got to go home.” Again, this idea that—I was always interested in merchants and I was always interested in, economically, people who were living kind of—sort of economically kind of fluid, and the race is just kind of—it’s just part of it.

This is called *The Devil is Beating His Wife* and I had a show at Whitney, Altria, in New York City. And this was my first attempt at sculpture. This is my first attempt to—is it possible for me to put sculpture and painting in the same room? It wasn’t that successful, but it was just me beginning. It was a project space and this is a project room show. And I think that the sculpture was interesting, but the sort of a Niagara waterfall--what that is is those very inexpensive waterfalls that sometimes you see in restaurants on the wall and they make a sound. I bought them pre-fabricated and I didn’t put my hand to it. I find that once I put my hand to something and bend it a little bit more, that something else happens.

And then there’s the bird, which I really like. This is sort of the myth of the crow. The sort of the idea historically what the crows mean for luck and sits over this kind of quasi-Zen Asian-ness, not particular Asian-ness, but just that kind of commercialized Asian-ness that we associate with yoga or you know like, woah...

[00:14:04]

You know, it’s like the internet, how the internet sort of wipes away subjectivity. And the cardboard box that it came in. And does anybody know what devil—where that comes from, the Devil is beating his wife?

Alright, so I was interested in two conditions existing at the same time. So when the devil is beating his wife that means it’s raining and sunny at the same time. So I think to myself, I was beginning to say, was it possible to have a social vocabulary and also a painting vocabulary? Or I was trying to bridge the gap between the social and the art historical, or asking questions? And so the first year of Miami Basel was in 2002 and I was given the opportunity to do something at Art Positions. And I had gotten some—I had become known for doing this sort of—I was becoming the “endpaper painting guy”, South Central endpaper guy.

And because what happens is a lot of times people, they go to the most easy equations to describe you. They’re not interested complexities; they’re interested in sound bites a lot of times. And I was mining a

territory that has been heavily described in a very particular way and I was using a very particular material and I was—. So necessarily, I understood the kind of easiness to fall into a conversation about my work, but at the same time being an artist, I was also interested in kind of questioning that. So I thought, here is the art world, this is it, Miami Basel. I don't want to put up endpaper paintings, I'm not interested in that, but maybe I can create something that has to do with merchant culture and the contemporary art world.

So I convinced them at Art Position, I said, "Look. If you just ship the contents of my hair salon to Miami, we'll just go in business. We'll just go in business. I'll just convince all the girls to come down." And actually, for about four years, when I finish work, my mother also works in the hair salon as well, so everybody will come down. We'll do it here. At first they were like "No, no, no," and they then finally said, "Alright. Okay, fine."

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So, great idea, but what happened was I thought that people were going to use these containers to do installations where everybody is sort of bringing in art work. So I got really nervous and scared because all the boxes of hair gels and things started arriving and there was no work. There was no art. So I thought it was a great idea initially, but then I got a little bit nervous. But then I thought, what the hell, and just kind of pushed forward with it.

So this is actually the shipping container. And inside, and that's Cleo who worked in the hair salon. Now, here is an interesting thing. The interesting part was not taking a hair salon from South Central and bringing it to Miami Basel and, simply, it would be mainly Caucasian hair. What made it interesting is the fact that I forgot something. I forgot the fact that I only know how to do black hair. That's all we do is black hair. So we come to Miami Basel and guess what? It's all Caucasian hair. And it really got to be interesting because what happened was we both had to step out of our comfort zone and create a third space. Really, really got interesting, it really, really got to the point, "Well, what is that? And what is that in your hair?"

So it really became this dynamic thing that kind of went on and it became so busy and we worked so much that it was quite active. It was really—

that's my mom and Cleo and the dealer that I had at that time, they're exhausted like, "We're kind of tired, Mark." But it was an interesting moment and you can see it sometimes. You would have the fish bowl like, "Whaaaaat?" And then sometimes you would have the kind of active. And it was an interesting moment and I kind of enjoyed that. So godliness is next to cleanliness.

[00:18:00]

So I'm going to go back to the sort of—and after that moment, I knew that I was done with the endpapers. Not because I knew that the material wasn't attractive, but I knew that I couldn't go any further with my practice and an openness. I'm always about investigation and moving my relationship to my work forward. And so I knew that I needed to put down that material. But of course, when you become known for something, you sort of economically sort of make a little change and you've gotten reviews and been in *Art Forum* and all these things. It can be a really scary proposition, but I was not interested. I was more interested in my own development as an artist more than the market.

So I went back to the city in the way in which I have always understood the city as being fascinating and being abstract and finding these little details that point to things and just being fascinated by it. I started just taking pictures of things that fascinate me. I've always loved the ways in which public space and neighborhoods that are little bit economically deprived in which the building codes are more relaxed. Middle-class neighborhoods, you really can't have vacuum cleaners in front of a church. It usually just doesn't work. But in neighborhoods where the citizens actually live a little closer to the edge, it's like, well, it's a church and we also sell vacuums and we can do it in tandem. But you get the most interesting challenges to staticness and you see this real hybridity. This really, really kind of immediacy and hybridity, it's always fascinated me.

And I went back to the paper. I said, "Well, I'm still fascinated with paper and most of the paper that I use in my works, they are the advertising that you see for plays and for iPods and cell phones and rims and Whitney Houston and Janet Jackson. I'm sure there'll be Michael Jackson Thriller anthologies now because—so you sort saw that a lot and so I

really went back to materials that had the social vocabulary embedded in them, that I didn't have to work for, that they were already there.

[00:20:21]

And another thing, I was always fascinated by the memories that are left on public space and I went to just 54th and Crenshaw, which is maybe two blocks away from my studio, and I just started looking at it and describing what was fascinating about it and sort of really almost like anthropologist writing it down. The whole lot and much of merchant culture, what I'm talking about, the signage, the carnival, the cucarachas, all the signs, it came out in the 1992 riots. What happened after 1992, there were so many burned out lots that cyclone fencing came up around all these lots.

Well, on Monday, if the cyclone fencings came up. Tuesday, informal economies popped up because they saw all this free advertising space. One sort of thing, policy, currency. And so I really became fascinated. So this is basically a burned down McDonalds after the 1992 riots. Why it's called the Hustler Carnival, I'll never know. I guess it's an homage to hip hop. It's kind of interesting. You have the palm trees. Because Los Angeles is 60% Latino, South Central really is 60% to 65% Latino. Why the sort of narrative of South Central refuses to change, I don't know. It's not really gangster. It's really not. It's not hip hop only. It's really this fluid transitioning from black to brown. And you just begin to see sign like [inaudible] completely in Spanish, unless you know that the neighborhood is transitioned from a black neighborhood into a Hispanic neighborhood.

[00:22:00]

The local hair braider. I've been watching this hand-painted advertising, the signage, for 15 years. And I decided to call her up and say, "You know, I've been watching you make these signs for 15 years. Are you an artist or you just—?" And she said, "No. I sell braids." And I thought, "So you've been doing exactly the same sign for 15 years?" And she said, "Do you want your hair braided?"

[Laughter]

Which is I really like because when you're in the sort of social fabric, she's like, "Where are you going with this?" It's kind of interesting. Old junk cars, so many people have expired registration or people drive with no

papers. So what happens is there's a large economy around selling cars on the sides of the streets because the police take them. And once a car is taken, they hold it for 30 days to make money. And if you don't have papers and if you don't have the money, more than likely you can't get the car back because the impound fees are too much. So you buy these new cars.

The first and second fence. If you see the first fence, that means that there was a fence there and it sort of eroded and they just put up a second fence without taking down the first fence. It's like Rome. They're continually unearthing a Rome on top of a Rome on top of a Rome. And you know, it's the same thing, a little bit different, but the same thing. So I just really wanted to describe that because it's sort of socially and politically where things that I'm just very interested in, these really small details or large details. And they become... this is [inaudible] which is kind of a weather pattern. This to me feels more almost cellular.

And the silver paper, I was trying to evoke a kind of atmosphere, creating a sort of like atmosphere, but using this reflective paper. The billboard paper and the clothing sort of the string that I use are the lines. I use string often to—I'll put a mark down, the kind of mode gesture of the sort of abstract gesture, but then I'm always removing myself from that. So the string, I trace my gesture and then I keep overlaying. I keep removing myself from the first gesture.

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It's sort of like you run across a relationship with somebody from... Sort of removing yourself, sort of stepping back from that. So I don't know why I do that. Maybe an emotional gesture, I'm always removing myself from it, removing myself from the hand. I don't know. Something in there, probably need therapy. Then I started thinking about grids and city grids and topographies and these are very large, unstretched. This is called *Temporary*. The utility service alerts. Have you been walking down the streets and you see something, it'll be spray painted in white or green or blue? Those are letting you know all the mechanisms that are happening under the city.

So I became kind of fascinated with the color breakdowns. Pink just means temporary. So the name of the piece is *Temporary*. I did one on

potable water, which is blue. So these mechanisms that are happening underneath the eye, underneath your feet that we really never see unless something happens; an earthquake, a catastrophe or something. We just assume. It's like our iPhones. We just assume that they're part of us until they stop working. It's sort of like technology, the way in which we—. And it's the same thing with mapping. I'm very fascinated with maps and how we all rely so much on a map. And a map guides us until it becomes obsolete, until it just is no longer working. Russia, I still travel through Russia as one map and now, you know, I look at Russia now, I'm just so confused in trying to figure out which countries are now and what is that and where—. It's sort of how things shift and sort of maps have to do with war, really the way in which the land is divided up, conqueror, who conquers and who gets divided up.

[00:26:15]

So I was part of Prospect.1 this last year. This is sort of the last project that I finished and I knew that I wanted to do something in New Orleans, but how does one go into someone else's yard? How does someone go—how do you move into someone else's house and say, "Hi, I'm here for six weeks and I want to do something." With so much recent history of distrust, so much neglect on every single level, but I knew that I wanted to be part of Prospect.1 and I knew that I was going to do a project, and I ended up doing this project. But the first thing that I did was I did a lot of documenting and I realized every single house in the New Orleans had to be inspected for bodies, every single house. And they would do these writings on each one of the houses.

So basically, it's one cat we're seeing and the inspector's initials were FW. And how many dead was the bottom number. So obviously, it was two in this house. And so, I started taking pictures, but I realized I was uncomfortable taking pictures of the devastation. So what I did was, I started to only take pictures of animals, of the animals that were found, one cat outside and you can see the northeast corner and you can see how many. And this is eight months ago. This is recent history. This is not like I went right after Katrina. Beagle taken.

And what I thought was really interesting, the thoughtfulness for the animals. They really made sure that if they were animals, that they really sort of made sure that they were counted and I thought that that was

something that really kind of showed the development of the rescue effort--wasn't just the people, but was animals as well. Both canines rescued...shepherd seen...and most of these sort of—this is still there. I mean, it's still like recent history.

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And so what I did was, I knew that I wanted to work in a vocabulary in which I work in and I use a sort of paper, but at the same time I knew that I wanted to make something little a bit larger. And I was looking a lot of Brutalist architecture and looking at things that kind of made sense architecturally for me and then I also—going back and forth so much I started working with a nonprofit organization in the Lower Ninth Ward called the L9, everything gone, everything sort of taken away. And so I thought, you know what? Just everything out of pool, I'll stop thinking about my project and I'll work with this. So I worked with him for over a year and we sort of built the infrastructure and we had a large auction and I auctioned a major work. And then, I think they raised close to \$200,000. And so that's Keith Calhoun, and these are the people that own the nonprofit.

And that really kind of got it off the ground, it sort of got arts movement and kind of L9 off the ground. They got infrastructure and they're programming now. I'm going to go back and sort of do something else there. But it's really the infrastructure because they were from the Lower Ninth Ward. And Keith is standing where his house used to be. The house you're seeing in the left hand corner is the house that he bought.

So when he came back to New Orleans, instead of buying a house for his family, he bought a shotgun to develop a nonprofit because he believed that art would bring people, would heal the community. Before he bought a house for his family, he was still living with his mother and driving back forth to Houston. I don't know if I could do that. If I had nothing, would I take the \$25,000 that I have raised and bought basically an artist space?

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I mean, it's essentially what he did. And it's so funny though because he kind of ran out of money. Then I was really lost, I was lost in the Lower Ninth Ward and I was walking around and walking around, and I just

knew there had to be something here. I said there has to be life, there's got to be something. And I happened to look in a window and see it painted white and I thought, "That's really cool, that's like art white, that's like gallery white." And so I just kind of knocked on the door and I said, "What are you doing here?", And he said, "Oh my name is Keith Calhoun and I want to build this nonprofit. It's going to be for artists," and I said, "Well, I'm an artist and let's work together."

So we really developed this friendship over the years but it sort of came out of artists helping artists. And so then I did go back to building this sculpture. The reason why I used shipping containers is a lot of the damage that was done in Lower Ninth Ward was done because the dock was close and so many shipping containers broke docks and smashed a lot of the houses.

So I wanted to use materials that lent themselves to a social vocabulary and this kind of Brutalist architecture, and then materials that I used and this was on a old funeral parlor actually. This is [inaudible] funeral parlor. So it's sort of self-explanatory. Every fifty years a crazy man builds an ark and they would always come by and they would say, what are you doing, is the world ending? It was fun.

So what happened was that I knew that Prospect.1 was going to—and you have to understand this, they have lot of community involvement and they knew what I did for L9 and they helped me build and we worked together so much. Actually, I was working so much in L9 that I decided I was not going to do the ark and they keep coming back and saying, "No, no, no, we want you to do the ark. We want to be a destination. We want them to come to the Lower Ninth Ward. We want you to do that." So I kind of went back to the sort of idea but I knew that Prospect.1 was going to open and unfortunately because New Orleans is a racially very divided city, I had to make sure that I was going to do something at the site in which everybody had worked.

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So we had this huge crab broil before Prospect.1 opened. Everyone came and it was two days and it was before it opened. And the best thing about it is there was very little life in this part of the Lower Ninth Ward. So they used it almost like as a reunion and the cars backed up just

around for a whole mile, you just look and see that there were cars and cars and cars. And after, people would say, “We knew there was something going on at this spot because someone phoned us, but we didn’t know what it was.”

So it really kind of just kind of sprung out of there and it was really—you just saw children, really you saw children and that kind of-- I helped her, and she helped me a lot and so I’m going to end with this slide because I think that so much of what I am interested in comes... Peace! Thank you.

[Applause]

Mark Bradford: Thank you, any questions? Okay, thanks. No. Yeah?

Male: I can tell how important you think arts are in the community. Could you tell me about, I understand you’re involved in an organization...grass roots..[inaudible].

Mark Bradford: Oh yeah. Well, I’m also involved with the organization called USA, United States Artists, and we give \$50,000 to 50 artists a year. And so much of what artists need at different times in their life, well, at different times we need money. Sometimes we need a gallery recommendation, sometimes we need—we need quite a bit of things, but what happens so much with artists and I think when you go to art school and—no one really tells you how to be an artist. If you go to school for law, you learn certain things and then there is sort of—but it’s really you get out and you really—no one really tells you how step-by-step process of that.

[00:34:22]

And so for me, I was always sort of scrapping around trying to figure it out and asking questions. But I realized that one of the things is I’m very strongly committed to artist production and how we can continue to stay independent and how we can continue to do what we do. And it’s something that I’m becoming more and more interested in. And it’s like becoming more and more interested in education, but sort of fundamentally, how do we go from grad school to the first five years and to the next ten years and do you know how to build a studio and do you know what parts of town are inexpensive and do you really know how to put a PowerPoint presentation? And tell me how are you going to carve

out four days out of your week? If you can't carve out four, how about three?

Because if you don't think about that, then that means you're going to carve out two because you're going to get a job nine-to-five and you're going to try to work on the weekends. And none of that is really a tragedy. It's just that it's something, if we could think about a little bit before we have the—we're deer in the headlights. Because so many of us, because we're not prepared on some level, end up going into jobs that we just weren't prepared for, we didn't know. So this organization is an artist organization. We give money and raise money and I was a recipient the first year and then they brought me on and I've stayed on the board and we raise money for artists to give money to artists.

Yeah?

Male: You spoke about the relationship between aesthetics and class, would you like to amplify that a little bit?

[00:36:02]

Mark Bradford: Yeah, I mean I think class is—you know this country is obsessed with race, but nobody really talks about class. I mean, really, there's a class aesthetic clearly that I have in my work. I mean, it's very vernacular, it's very sort of it's very vernacular and it's very accessible. If it doesn't come from Home Depot, usually I don't use it. And it is not that I can't afford to not have things come from Home Depot, it's simply that I'm interested in having a conversation about access, access and who uses which materials.

The thing for me when I was in CalArts, every artist has different ideas but they would send us all to the art store to get materials. And I thought, "Wait a minute. We all have these different ideas, but we're going to the same art store. Shouldn't the first gesture be questioned?" So I was like, "Wait a minute, I'm not so sure when I get Winsor & Newton. I'm not so sure I want to get—wait a minute, let me just—I'm not so sure." So for me, I had to kind of go back and question the first gesture, which was the material.

Obviously, I'm—the painting at the Dallas Museum, I'm very clear I know where all of it is going. It's not propped up on the side of the street on

54th and Crenshaw where my studio is. It's in the Dallas Museum. I'm not questioning where art and how it's housed and what it does. This simply for me, it's important to look at materials and sort of inherently look at what is in the materials and look at sort of—without saying anything, material can be so loaded. It can be so political without saying anything. It can make gestures racially, across class. So many, without saying anything and that's something that I use merchant posters, I use—.

[00:38:03]

But you see it all over the world. I mean, I travel a lot and people make use of everything, just everything, from bottle cap to a—. So that's something that has always been sort of particular in my work. And it probably had something to do with the fact that maybe when I was—maybe I had to be a little bit more in there. I thought, well, I'm going to go to this CalArts, a fancy school. It's a private university and I'm going to get this private education and use words like, you know, “disenfranchisement” and “Henri Foucault” and “trajectories”. And I'll say it's *trajectory* instead of *stories* because it's my education. It's the education I learned in art school.

But if I wanted to create another layer of conversation in the work then it was going to be up to me. And I remember asking myself, well, how am I going to do that? How I'm going to do that? And it was just important to me because it's just important to me. I don't know, it wasn't important to me because I was from the hair salon. That's not necessarily, I don't know. It was just simply important for me to create another layer to the work. Sometimes I would do it. And I'm an abstract painter, so I knew that it wasn't—the layer wasn't going to be because I was going to do—I do do video work and I make some sculptures, but what I do day-to-day is painting.

So I had to create another layer, and I think that that's why I went to the billboard paper, to create color and to texture but it had the social vocabulary that was kind of built into it.

Yeah?

Female:

You talked about bridging the gap between the social and art historical, and I'm wondering what kind of art historical—?

Mark Bradford: Painting, abstract painting. You know, I love Rauschenberg and Cy Twombly and I just read an article on De Kooning and I just, I love painting. You know, I love painting but then I—you know, I think probably have talked more tonight about the social than the painting.

[00:40:00]

I really don't care about the surface of painting, the little fetishes that some painters love to talk about. I just don't really care, I just don't. But then, oh this tube of paint cost—I don't really care. I love abstraction maybe on a very broad sense, sort of, but the material of paint itself has never been interesting and I love—you know, I live in the world and I like the world. I like the world and I'm interested in kind of social conversations and it's always fascinated me. And I grew up in that. I grew up moving across territories, kind of socially and economically and politically. So I just kind of wanted to have a conversation with all that in my work. And sometimes, I don't know, it works and sometimes and it doesn't.

Yeah?

Male: Does it have something to do with the scale of painting?

Mark Bradford: You know, people say that because I'm tall, you know. I don't know. Yeah, maybe. The first large scale work that I did, I was very uncomfortable doing it. I thought that I—the thing you learn about body, when the shape of your body is different than most people, is you learn how to move through public space in a way that you don't take up too much space. Sit in the back, it's just sort of you learn to be tall and you learn to be kind of polite. People ask you thirty times a day how tall you are and you answer, I'm 6'8, and you go I'm 6'8, I'm 6'8...

You know, you sort of learn polite American behavior. You learn to-- you don't ask a woman's age, which is polite. But it's within our social vocabulary to ask how tall a person is. So no one thinks that they're being rude. So you learn to take up space and not take up so much space and all these things. So when I wanted to work large, the first thing I thought was, "Oh, I'm taking up too much space, I guess it's not—." Really, I thought, it's just too big, it's not polite. And I think that there was a moment where I had to struggle with it or I kind of had to say, well, you know.

[00:42:08]

I just kind of have to—but there absolutely, because I’m really more aware of my body just because—well, people just make me aware of it. I’m just aware of it all time. It’s not like it—God, much more than being black, much more than being black. I’m reminded of it by silliness that I’m black, you know, if a woman walks in front me and grabs her purse, I’m like, “Oh, black”. You know, like got to the airplane, everything is fine and the car was supposed to pick me up. It’s fine, no problem. I walk outside. I’m standing exactly, you know, it says C12 and I’m just standing there. Nobody around. I watch a car go one time around, two times—there’s like nobody around. It’s just me. Now, three times around like, what kind—I mean, come on.

So finally, the company calls me and said, “Hey Mr. Bradford, where are you?” I said, “Well, C12, me.” And, you know, he said, “We need to get a visual on you.” I thought, what kind of visual? There is nobody around, C12, me. I said, “You know what, I’m black.” And he said, “Oh.” The same car that had been circling around came back. So, that kind of silliness, and I’m laughing about it, but I’m talking about it in a racial vocabulary, but make no mistake about it.

It’s not particular to me. I think that we all run across silliness. I can look across—you know, I can look out in the room. I can see people in dreadlocks and this one with a gray hair. I can see all these kinds of—I can’t assume that I know anything about you because you have gray hair. I can’t assume that you’re a grandmother. I can’t assume that you’re a great grandmother. I can’t assume. But we make these really general kind of quick, kind of stereotypical things about people. And so I just call it silliness. Oh, you get caught up in silliness, you just get caught up in silliness and you just kind of flick it off and you just keep on going. That’s kind of funny, you know, Where are you, Mr. Bradford? C12.

Way in the back.

[00:44:12]

Female: I’m interested in the installation that you said you did. You said it wasn’t very successful.

Mark Bradford: Oh, yeah, yeah.

Female: [Inaudible]

Mark Bradford: Well, you know—

Female: I want you—I just want you to talk a little bit about...

Mark Bradford: Like what?

Female: [inaudible]

Mark Bradford: Well you know, I'm always one of those people--I'm more interested in the investigation than in the ending point. So for me, I thought, well, it's a project space and I'll do a project. I thought project space means investigation. Well, generally, when you have a professional career, a project space doesn't really mean project space, it means "little show." You know, who knew? So I thought, Oh, project space. It's at the Whitney, but project space. So I'm just going to investigate. I knew it felt heavy and I knew it felt a little awkward but I thought, well, this is what you do. You work things out, you put them out there. You just kind of—I'm figuring it out. I'm in process.

Well, it was uneven, it absolutely was uneven and I knew that it was uneven. And when I was putting it up, I knew that it was uneven. It's like a marriage, sometimes you marry that first guy. You know it not going to work out, but you just go through with it because you just need to learn the lessons. I think all work is like a relationship. Yeah, and then you know, your friends later on say, "You know what, why did you—"I'm like, "Yeah, I know, but yeah." So it's sort of like—and then it got kind of crucified in the press and I thought, "I wonder why people me are crucifying me so much? It was a project space." But I learned from that, I learned to sort of look at my ideas a little bit more and focus my ideas a little bit more and think about what I'm really trying to say and looking a little bit more deeper into the materials, or pass the materials to the ideas.

[00:45:59]

So I'm not necessarily saying that it was not, I don't know, good or bad. I don't look at it, but I learned a lot from the show and I had sort of—and then I had gotten so much good press for these end paper paintings. I debuted at the Studio Museum of Harlem and I've had this big, you know.

Then I thought, God, they're always talking nice about me. Oh, come on, let's get to the—come on, like a fort is not a fort until it's been tested. I'm like, enough already, like it should be a little more uneven. So maybe I was shooting myself in the foot a little bit on purpose. I don't know, but—

Yeah? Uh-hmm?

Female: Can you talk about the process and techniques that went into the painting in *Private Universes*?

Mark Bradford: Right, yeah. That's a good piece. That was really topographical. A lot of times I'll start with a memory of a map and then I'll free hand it. Again, it goes very much into abstraction. The difference is with this piece here, I was still using billboard information, but I wanted more colored intensity and smaller sort of areas formally. So if you look at this piece, actually, it's comic book, and that sort of brought up this kind of pop culture reference and popular cultural reference. And I did like it but it started--not on the painting that's here--but I felt that there was a sort of narrative that people would look and say, "Well, I see that little Superman face and then I see that face and so he's talking about Superman fighting." So I said, "Oh boy,...."

But I was looking for a color density and an intensity, and that city, they're all abstract cities. I abstract them so far from the real that I don't know what they are anymore, but black paper, string and all materials that I use. I'm not answering your question, I'm not like formally saying, "And I did this and I did that". I'm not right, I know. I'm really bad at the like—you know, that part, I'm like really bad at.

Yeah?

[00:48:14]

Female: You mentioned the video work before. Can you talk about that?

Mark Bradford: You know, I'm kind of dressed in this kind of antebellum hoop dress Laker thing and I played on the basketball court. A detail of people walking down the street, it's just the video work comes out of a detail that fascinates me. Some of it has a very social kind of vocabulary. It's usually

a detail, detail and social space that fascinates me and I kind of home in on that one detail.

Yup? There's one—yeah?

Female: You started talking a little bit about being an artist, you know, having your doubts or being nervous. And I was wondering if you can just talk about a little bit about that relationship to your work, navigating your confidence [inaudible].

Mark Bradford: That never goes away, ever. If it does go away, that's not a good place to be. You are always living in a state of doubt. You always question what you're doing. You question your materials, you question why you're doing this. That doesn't go away. What starts to grow is that you just believe—you have a confidence, this is what I'm supposed to be doing. This is what I'm supposed to be doing. And it's not because the marketplace tells you or your teachers tell you. You just at some point you have to have a confidence that this is what you are supposed to be doing. And you have to answer that question and never ask yourself that again.

It's the same question that I ask my self when I was in New Orleans standing in Lower Ninth Ward for one second I said, "Should an artist be making work now in New Orleans? Shouldn't I be like working with an organization?" And I said, "You know what, I'm an artist and I believe in what I do and so if I believe in what I do, then I should be doing it." Artists have made work through history, through political ups and downs and will continue to make to work through political unrest but we have to believe that this is what we do.

[00:50:02]

The doubts don't go away. Every time I finish a painting, I would think it's the last thing I'll ever do. I said, "Oops, that's it." The one upstairs? I said, "I'm done. That's it. Well, I probably don't have another one in me." You come back to the studio the next day and you get going. And then a lot times you're working in the dark. It's not all—you're not always working in confidence. Sometimes you're working in a very uncomfortable, lack of confidence place. It's sort of like when—but I'm confident in being unconfident. Like when I'm driving, I drive the same

when I'm lost as when I'm not lost. I just drive... totally lost, just drive, turn the corner. You know where you're going? Nope! Totally lost.

[Laughter]

But you know, it's like I still—you know, I move forward. So I think it's healthy to have doubt. But you just have to answer the question, are you going to do this, are you not going to do this? That's about the the only question you really—and then the rest will just kind of fall in.

I'll take one more question. Yup? Okay two minutes. You have—uh-huh?

Female: I have a question. Your studio space, where is it again?

Mark Bradford: South Central.

Female: [Overlapping]. Well, I'm curious with how you're neighbors react to your work there [Overlapping]?

Mark Bradford: All right, right. Well, you know the building that I own now is the building that my mom's hair salon was in. So the neighbors knew me as a kid working, playing in the window....you know, like kids do. They always do the same stuff. What is that? But anyway. So they knew me as a hair dresser and then I went away to school. So then I came back and so I have my studio. My world is pretty hybrid. It's not all anything, it's not all black, it's not all gay, it's not all straight. I get everybody going through there.

[00:52:00]

So what happens is that it's just another layer, it's simply another layer. Sometimes big MoMA buses pull up and you know. And I'm like, "What?" But you know, it's like that's, you know? So it's all just like this, it's very fluid. It's sort of like, I don't live in my life in binaries. I don't live it like—I don't present this side of myself to these people and this side of myself to those people. No you just get it like, "This is Mark baby." That's how I do it.

Right, Aaron? Aaron is in the back. He's nodding his head, because he knows. One of my best friends, Aaron, in the back row. But this is—I'm

always the same. If you always stay the same you don't have to remember what you told people.

[Laughter]

So that's it. Okay, thank you all, I appreciate you coming.

[Applause]

00:53:01

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