

Breaking down barriers

ART & CULTURE



Mark Bradford's work is the subject of a large-scale exhibition at Shanghai's Long Museum. The artist tells us his LA story is relevant to a much larger audience, and how his work will change the world.

BY CHRISTINA KO



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ore than a decade ago, in the wake of Hurricane Katrina, Mark Bradford took part in Prospect.1, a biennial exhibition in New Orleans. To create his submission, Bradford headed down to the disaster-stricken neighbourhood of the Lower Ninth ward, talking to residents, understanding their plight, and collecting the materials — physical and emotional — that would later form the basis for his work. *Mithra* (2008), a gigantic ship inspired by Noah's Ark, was forged of poster-covered plywood barricade fencing discarded at local sites, forming a symbol of hope for residents looking to rebuild their lives.

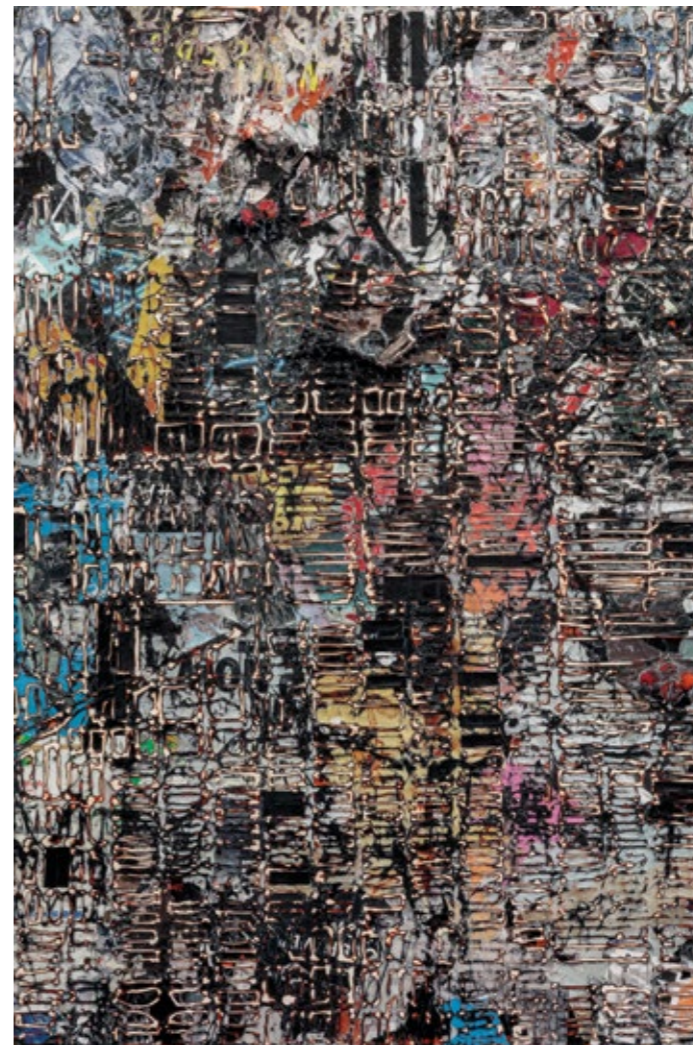
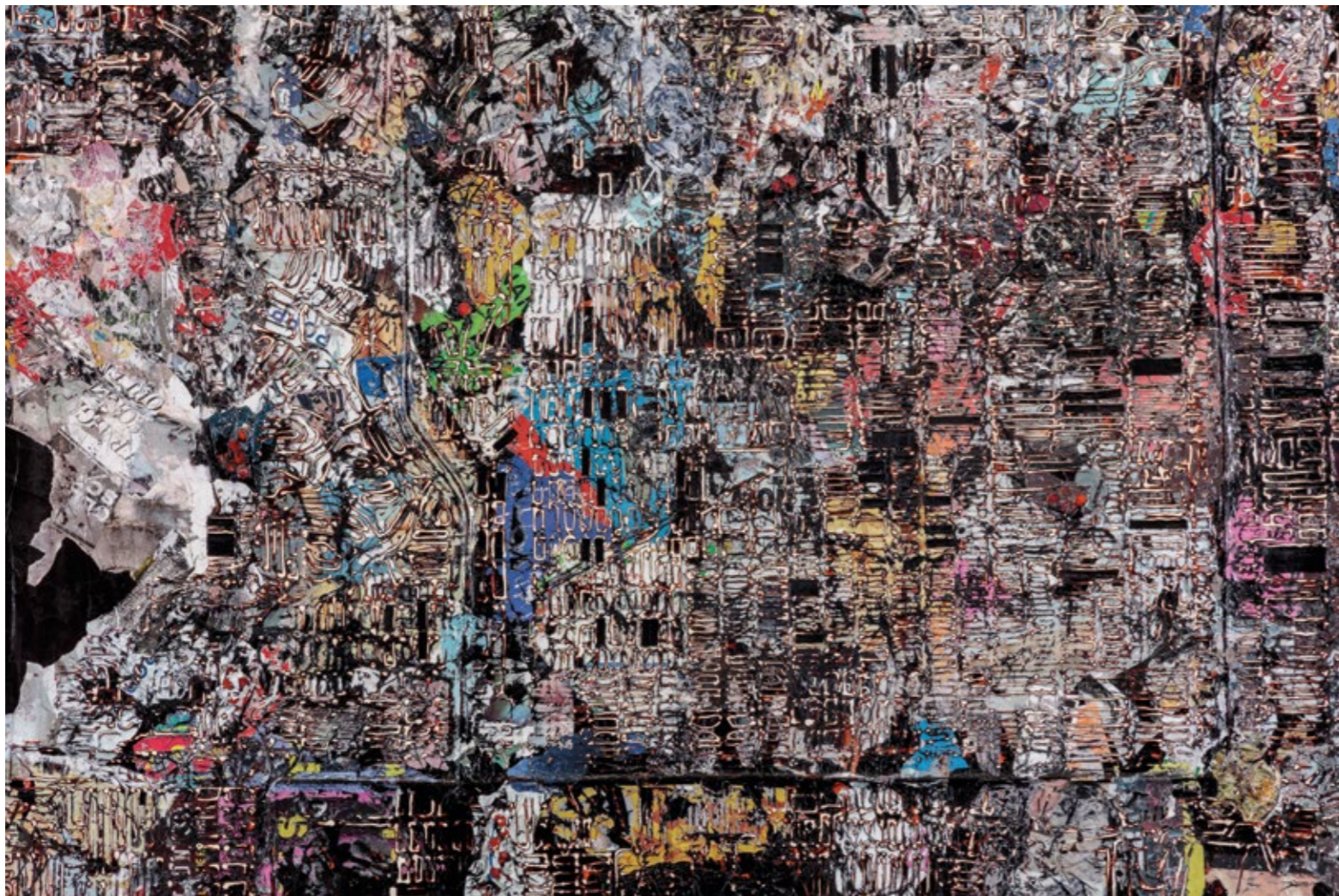
The large and imposing structure is the first piece visitors to Bradford's show at the Long Museum in Shanghai will encounter upon entry. Though the venue is expansive, *Mithra* is still an almost-oppressive presence, a fitting reminder that, 10 years on, Bradford's practice deals with society's most uncomfortable ongoing problems, from the rehabilitation of a city following a natural disaster, to the marginalisation of certain groups in America due to issues of race, gender, sexuality or economic designation. Beyond that, Bradford has always sought to find some manner in which to solidify the relationship between art and social progress: whether it is through awareness or more concrete initiatives such as related partner programmes through his own non-profit organisation Art + Practice, or in this case, giving access to the greater public by eliminating admission fees for this show. Billed as his largest in China, it is actually also his biggest ever.

The exhibition, titled Mark Bradford: Los Angeles, may put the focus on the artist's hometown, where he made the transition from gay hairdresser from the wrong side of the tracks to art-world superstar, but the themes he explores are universal. Among the large-scale paintings the artist is showing from the last two years of his career, is the eponymous painting *Los Angeles*, inspired by the Watts Rebellion, a 1965 people's rebellion that took place in a

(left) Fashioned from wood salvaged from the wreckage of Hurricane Katrina, *Mithra* is now displayed at the Long Museum, Shanghai; (above) Mark Bradford

ART & CULTURE

MY BODY IS POLITICAL — THE BLACK BODY



The eponymous Los Angeles, which was inspired by the Watts Rebellion

IS POLITICAL — SO FOR ME, BEING AN ARTIST

suburb of LA that resulted in mass arrests and controversy. Another site-specific piece created to fill one hall is a system of large black planets, titled *He would see this country burn if he could be king of the ashes*. It might refer to a certain politician currently in office, but its application can be further-reaching. “It is [about] power,” Bradford says, matter-of-factly. “Some things just don’t change. ‘Excuse me, sir, can you just change?’ When has that ever happened?”

Why is the exhibition named for Los Angeles?

Something as generic as Los Angeles can really make everybody’s mind really fevered. It’s like *Blade Runner*, it’s dystopia, it’s nowhere and everywhere. It’s my relationship with the city but it’s also my relationship with cinema and the construction of Los Angeles in popular culture. That’s really where it came from. It’s also because that’s where I made the

work... Sometimes I’ll make all this work for a space that’s really far away and then it has nothing to do with [Los Angeles]; and I thought, this time I’m going to do the opposite where it’s all going to be embedded — like the Watts Rebellion. The map is where my studio is, so it really was just me wanting to have a point of departure.

How relevant are these themes to a Chinese audience?

I’m curious to find out, I really am. *Mithra*, when you start to unpack that story, it’s part of a major event that happened. So that story is probably as important as the object itself that starts the conversation. The problem with the Internet is that sometimes it can flatten others into a stereotype: “Oh, that group of people or that group of people.” So what I’m hoping comes out of this is just that people say, “Oh, this is kind of a complex person.”

That’s really what I wanted to come out of it. It’s not the love and hip hop narrative, the ones you constantly have, the basketball player narrative. I always get it. I walk in the street, “Oh, you’re a basketball player.”

You enjoy picking certain events, current or historical, and taking them as the starting point for a piece. How does the manifestation of these events in your work tie in with your general purpose or message?

Oftentimes, if I’m thinking about something historical, say *Pickett’s Charge* at the Hirshhorn [Museum & Sculpture Garden, which was inspired by a key event in the Battle of Gettysburg], I think it’s my way of revising history a little bit. Unpacking that history, opening it up a little bit. I’m always obsessed with the meta-narratives and the grand narratives. Maybe we could look at that a little differently? I mean, you look at the

PHOTOS MARK BRADFORD/HAUSER & WIRTH

AND BEING POLITICAL ARE HAND IN

bill of rights, when we were slaves, when we were property. I’m always looking to revise things and abstract them. I love social abstraction — taking something that’s really a social document and abstracting it a little and finding new ways. Well, I might be a little sacrilegious. I might be. But nicely.

You always find a way to weave elements of social consciousness into your exhibitions. This time, Long Museum is waiving admission fees for the first time ever. How did that come about?

That was part of the idea in my head when constructing the show. It was always part of the show. Halfway through planning, in a meeting, I just said, “Oh, and the show will be free.” They were like, wait, what? Museum director Wang Wei didn’t have a problem with it. Because it’s part of access.

In other exhibitions, you’ve used different formats. At the Venice Biennale, you created a project to integrate members of a women’s prison back into society.

Do you consciously seek to mix it up when it comes to these initiatives as an example to other artists?

No. It happens so organically. Where this probably comes from is the fact that I never could separate my body from being an artist. I wasn’t a white male who could disappear in the studio and then walk out into the world and just be. I couldn’t do that; as soon as I left the studio, I was a black male. I was always politically aware of my body, walking up to houses, police stopping me. My body is political — the black body is political — so for me, being an artist and being political are hand in hand, I never even contemplated it.

So when I’m doing an exhibition, my brain is just thinking about everything. I am thinking about the white cube, but I’m also thinking about what’s outside the white cube. Like, when I’m walking here, walking outside, I see people skateboarding, and I wonder, why are they skateboarding? That’s just how the lens of my mind is. Some things really fascinate and grab me; like I’d never heard of a women’s prison in Venice but I thought, that’s perfect. Biennale could use a little bit of that.

When anyone asks how artists should [reach out to the community], I say just partner with organisations that have lots of need and not a lot of money. The art world has a lot of money but not as much need. So that’s what I’ve always done.

And you’ve really put this into practice with your non-profit organisation, Art + Practice, which allows the community of South Los Angeles to engage with art. What’s new there?

We’re really doubling down on reaching out to foster youth, looking at [how to work with them] more. We have a robust public lecture series every Thursday night, and it’s amazing how the community comes out and listens. So that thing about how people won’t get it? No. Just put it there, and let them decide. We’re keeping the mission focused and just expanding it. It’s in its fifth year.

Are art and social practice separate and distinct for you? Or does your work always have an element of giving back?

I think it’s all the same. When did art become this thing that was way out here, and life was happening over here? Was it the Enlightenment period and Leonardo? Did he do that? When did we get separated, when did we stop getting invited to the party? I’m sorry, I’m at the table with everybody else. We belong with everybody else. Our ideas are interesting. We have something to say. And I don’t believe in isolation of anything. **A**

HAND, I NEVER EVEN CONTEMPLATED IT