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"Abstraction is Power": Abstraction and Affect in Mark Bradford's Work

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RÉSUMÉ. Cet article s'intéresse à la manière dont l'artiste Mark Bradford conçoit le genre de l'abstraction. Cet artiste contemporain afro-américain produit une œuvre qui traverse les genres mais qui repose toujours sur l'abstraction, une modalité esthétique qui lui permet de se situer dans la tradition désormais classique de l'expressionisme abstrait aux États-Unis, tout en lui donnant l'opportunité d'installer au cœur de son travail une réflexion sur la situation socio-politique de son pays. Il propose des œuvres qui s'imposent physiquement au spectateur afin de transformer cette émotion en action politique. Bradford écrit sa propre histoire de l'art en cherchant à réconcilier abstraction et considérations sociales. Cet article part de la manière dont Bradford associe l'abstraction au pouvoir avant de s'intéresser à l'abstraction comme un outil communautaire, ce qui lui permet en dernier lieu de reconsidérer l'abstraction comme le lieu d'une prise de pouvoir esthétique et politique.

ABSTRACT. *This paper explores the way Mark Bradford, an African-American contemporary artist, reflects on the power of abstraction in his work. His multi-faceted visual production is deeply grounded in abstraction, an aesthetic mode he envisions as a way of responding to the grand tradition of Abstract Expressionism in the United States, as well as a way of commenting on the socio-political situation of his country. His works seek to affect the viewers physically in order to lead to political awareness. Bradford writes his own history of art, one which seeks to reconcile abstraction and social concerns. This paper explores how Bradford equates abstraction and power before looking at abstraction as a social tool able to give new power to abstraction.*

MOTS CLÉS : Bradford, Abstraction, Expressionisme abstrait, Biennale de Venise, canon, art afro-américain

KEYWORDS: *Bradford, Abstraction, Abstract Expressionism, Venice Biennale, the canon, African-American art*

Ad Reinhardt famously defined his work as a search for "a pure, abstract, non-objective, timeless, spaceless, changeless, relationless, disinterested painting – an object that is self-conscious (no unconsciousness), ideal, transcendent, aware of nothing but art." (Reinhardt 82-3) This definition of abstraction goes to the root of the word by presenting a list of subtractions emphasized, in Reinhardt's definition, by the repetition of the suffix "less". Reinhardt, one of the iconic figures of American abstract expressionism, who was key to the turn toward minimalism and conceptualism, offers here a familiar trope from a certain philosophical take on cognition and feeling: namely, that abstraction can only exist in terms that separate it from felt reality. This way of reading abstraction as a movement towards more and more idealism, which Reinhardt would reach with his series of *Ultimate* paintings in the 1960s, has enormously influenced the way critics have viewed the history of American art in the mid to late twentieth century, and is probably best represented by Clement Greenberg's formalist criticism. I am particularly struck by the use of the word "disinterested", which implies that the work of art in Reinhardt's historical moment is successful to the extent that it exists on a plane completely separated from any relationships; in other words, completely separated from any possibility of affect, any appeal to feeling. It does its work by negating, by eliminating contextual references, self-consciousness or feelings. If earlier Abstract Expressionist painters saw themselves as operating within a framework of universal and primitive emotions, in which abstraction would express certain archetypes of feeling, the movement grew towards a quest for more abstraction, as illustrated in Reinhardt's minimalism and conceptualism.

The spirit of Reinhardt's modernism once reigned over the critical literature on abstraction. However, recent scholarship has started to question these premises, reading American abstraction against the background of the historical moment in which it emerged. In other words, this criticism makes abstract art about "time, space, change, relation, [and] interestedness". In this new narrative, the arc of the movement towards a more and more rigorous abstraction took place within a historical context that intruded on and conditioned the motives and forms of abstract painting. Reading abstraction as "transcendent", which was Reinhardt's stance, suggests that this kind of art affects us on a spiritual level, without allowing for a more direct emotional response grounded in our everyday experiences.

In contrast, contemporary artist Mark Bradford's use of abstraction offers a very interesting answer to the history of American abstraction as his oeuvre presents itself as a reflection on the relationship between abstraction and felt reality, a duality which we can also phrase as the bringing together of abstraction and our emotional response to our everyday lives and our connection to history. Bradford's awareness of the political and social context of earlier American schools of abstraction is compounded by his awareness of the segregation of modern African-American art, and its ideological reading by certain critics, both within and without the African-American art community, as ineluctably figurative.

It is in the framework of these parallel themes that I would like to explore Mark Bradford's use and theory of abstraction as a contemporary African-American artist:

he is extremely overt as a commentator of his work and sees it in relation to the history of American art, thus allowing for a reflection on the current discussion on formal explorations and their potential intersections with political questions[1] as well as on the way the works themselves affect us.

Mark Bradford's rise to celebrity was swift but is recent, which is why I would like to mention a few biographical facts: he is a gay African-American artist, originally from South Central Los Angeles, born a few years before the Watts riots, but raised as a teenager in almost all white Santa Monica. He was in his early thirties at the time of the Rodney King riots. At that time, he was a hairdresser, trained in his mother's beauty shop. He was doing art before he entered art school at nearly 30. His first big solo show was in 1998. From there he went on to achieve rapid prominence in the contemporary American art world, with the ultimate recognition coming when he was chosen to represent the United States at the 2017 Venice Biennale.

His art is deeply rooted in the urban environment he grew up in, which is present in his work both as material and style; in other words, his art is made with the very objects that affect the everyday lives of the people whose experiences he celebrates in his paintings. He started using material from his mother's beauty salon, before adding to his palette detritus from the streets and billboards of his neighborhood – all found material, creating highly abstract works which are embedded in the urban realities of South Central Los Angeles. The coexistence of high abstraction and deep roots in his social and local context raises thus the question of the political and emotional potentialities of his abstractions.

His art brings together a great many oppositions: coming from the social margins of Los Angeles and becoming the representative of his country at the Venice Biennale, being a social activist through his *Art + Practice* foundation which seeks to educate African-American foster kids and having his work reach a high value in the art world, creating works that are both deeply grounded in the realities of South Central and works of abstraction, he bridges many gaps. Perhaps most strikingly, he brings together abstraction and politics, inhabiting a space that has been the object of many theoretical debates among African-American artists since W.E.B. Du Bois' famous 1926 statement according to which "all art is propaganda" (Du Bois 290), a strong phrase which sought to oppose the notion of "pure art" defended by Alain

[1] The current art conversation in the United States has been marked by a number of exhibitions and debates around the intersections between abstraction and what we could call minority visibility. What space do art institutions give to formal explorations from so-called minority artists? Why has the artworld tended to be cut along dividing lines separating formalist explorations on one side and sociopolitical discourse on the other? The debate was illustrated in the 2016 exhibition *Blackness in Abstraction* curated by Adrienne Edwards at New York's Pace Gallery. The show displaced traditional categories separating abstraction and the multi-layered notion of "blackness" to bring about a reflection on abstraction *and* blackness, opening up the art discussion to a wide array of possibilities which all refuse traditional categories. Adrienne Edwards writes: "In response to the demands placed on black artists for social content in their art, I put forward blackness in abstraction. Applicable to artwork in any medium, it is an attempt to understand how artists negotiate and exhaust the paradigm of black representation in visual art. I resist a precise definition, while making a claim for its emergent condition and profound capaciousness. There are infinite manifestations, best comprehended through specific instances" (Edwards 68).

Locke for example and which Du Bois believed avoided the social and racial situation of African-Americans and to which he preferred works that would forcefully confront the racism of American society. Du Bois' statement seems on the one hand to preclude the formal possibilities of art experimentation for African-American artists, and, on the other hand, to imply that those artists who are formally experimental forfeit a strong political affect. It must be remembered that the use of the word "propaganda", in the context of the early 20th century, was a way of answering the mainstream criticism that references to racism in black art were equal to propaganda, as shown by Eric King Watts in his study of Du Bois' public voice, but it is a useful word to underline the question of affect and politics in African-American art. Bradford's work blends the formal – here, abstraction – and the political – by which I mean felt politics, the way reality impacts us on an emotional level – in such a way as to break with the paradigm that separates them, making abstraction the very locus of the political.

Bradford conceives of abstraction as a social, political and aesthetic weapon that should trigger an emotional response. His work seeks to engage with the world of affect in which the artist, the artwork, and the viewer are embedded, leading to emotional responses which all attempt to make us remember that the walls of the museum in which they hang were built in cities where racial inequality and physical separation are a daily reality. The larger point is that art does participate in the everyday violence of American life, and that its transcendence cannot go beyond its various degrees of complicity and dissent. Bradford roots his art in both the celebration of urban life characteristic of modernism but also in a form of political engagement that exposes the systematic inequities that have oppressed black Americans.

I want to explore the way Bradford negotiates between formal and political explorations of abstraction by referring to his canvas pieces, as well as to the installation he made for the 2017 Venice Biennale.[2] I will first look at the way Bradford equates abstraction and power (he claimed in an interview with filmmaker Barrie Jenkins that "power is abstraction"), before exploring his notion of "social abstraction", in order to see how these social abstractions create a very fruitful space for the expression and the sharing of affect.

"Abstraction is Power"

Significantly, Bradford often refers to the way his art resonates with Abstract Expressionism, positioning his work within the discourse of American abstraction and the powerful role it played in shifting the art conversation from Europe to the US in the 1950s, as documented by Serge Guibault in his *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art: Abstract Expressionism, Freedom and the Cold War*. This was at the heart of an exhibition entitled *Shades* presented at the Denver Art Museum in the spring

[2] The works referred to in this article can be viewed on the website of his Gallery, Hauser and Wirth: https://www.hauserwirth.com/artists/2838-mark-bradford

of 2017 showing Bradford's works in relation to Clyfford Still's paintings,[3] exploring how both artists use the colour black in their art. Bradford explained his interest in the Abstract Expressionists and particularly in Clyfford Still because of the very physical relationship he had to his material: making his own paint for instance, exactly as Bradford makes his own material for his art. Bradford has explained that he was looking to bring his political pieces in conversation with a representative of Abstract Expressionism, this seminal moment in American art that has mostly been considered on aesthetic grounds by the way it was used by the American government as a Cold War weapon, but rarely from the perspective of its relationship to American life. He has explained over his many interviews the need to look at this founding moment in American art from the vantage point of the struggle for civil rights as well as the underground links between African-American culture and the rise of abstract art. He mentions for instance the connections between the work of Jackson Pollock and the free jazz of Ornette Coleman, or the work of African-American abstract painters who have been left out of this history such as Norman Lewis among others who participated in the movement of Abstract Expressionism. What comes out of these references is Bradford's very strong concern with history and his position within this history, while also refusing to follow history's tendency to marginalize or celebrate cultural figures.

Bradford's commentary on the history and present state of his country can be seen in the highly abstract itinerary he made for the American Pavilion, an installation which resonates with the United States' first shock-win of the Biennale's prize: Robert Rauschenberg's 1964 entry, which in a way officially recognized American art's influence on the international scene. Bradford is evidently in implicit discussion with his first prize-winning compatriot who moved away from Abstract Expressionism to bring onto the canvas everyday objects while erasing the distinction between painting and sculpture, a gesture followed by Bradford today who, in full consciousness of Rauschenberg's trajectory is also using his Abstract Expressionist heritage while turning abstraction away from the transcendent and towards the concrete and everyday.

We see what a central position this contemporary artist, who studied at Calarts, California's theory-centered art school, gives to the 50s and 60s in keeping a continuous dialogue with some of its most prominent figures, who are all white icons of America's recent artistic hegemony. In an interview, Bradford brings into focus the way he has wrestled with abstraction and his sense of the tradition he is both continuing and refusing. Here is how he addresses his use of abstraction:

> [H]istorically abstraction has always belonged to the canon. It's still the biggest export this country has made: big white men of the 1950s; Jackson Pollock. Then the feminists unpacked it and put it away and said, "Bad." And that was it, but it's still in the canon. I said, "Wait a minute, now. We didn't even get a piece of that

[3] The exhibition's website can be found at this address: https://denverartmuseum.org/exhibitions/shade-clyfford-still-mark-bradford

> pie." But I didn't want abstraction that was inward looking; I wanted abstraction that looked out at the social and political landscape. So, I took that stuff to my studio and, through alchemy, presented something. My work always has to do with how people occupy this world and demanding that we have a seat at the table of power. If power is abstraction, which many black men, black women, and people of color have very little voice in, well, then I want to sit at that table. And I'm not going to ask (Jenkins).

Beyond an obvious anxiety of influence, this statement shows the importance for Bradford to claim a role in the US artworld, but it also shows his belief that formal explorations should not be separated from political discourse and that both should feed into one another ("I wanted abstraction that looked out at the social and political landscape"). He explains that he wants to "*interrogate a black space through abstraction*" (Jenkins), thus turning against the typical image of American abstraction – particularly abstract expressionism – as a non-political, white form of art that recent exhibitions and scholarship have started addressing. Bradford gives a lot of attention to this issue which has long been a problem within the African-American modernist tradition: is black art avoiding confronting racism when it turns to abstraction? As long ago as 1979, Michelle Wallace, in an essay on her mother, the artist Faith Ringgold, comments on her initial shock when Ringgold turned from figurative work to abstraction:

> But the *Emanon* series, which was entirely abstract, was harder to accept. Her previously strict avoidance of anything like free abstraction had not prepared me for this sudden transition in her work. On the contrary, I thought we had settled the issue long ago when we had agreed that abstract painting was severely limited in its ability to depict emotional states, or much of anything else for that matter, that the nature of abstraction was essentially what everybody had always incorrectly attributed to crafts – it was decorative, inconsequential (Wallace 53).

Wallace demonstrates here a distrust of abstraction which is important to remember when looking at Bradford's conscious desire to use abstraction as his main aesthetic tool. Bradford seems to answer this distrust of abstraction by using materials which are about emotions and the quotidian, using endpapers from his mother's hairdressing shop – a material that is both intimate and socially encoded. It is part of Bradford's repertoire of artistic strategies to enter the way "people occupy this world", by using materials which do not come from the genius of the artist but exist in the very materiality of everyday life. In recognizing this fact, Bradford refuses the transcendent orientation of the elite world of abstract art and confronts us with the materials and detritus of everyday life in South Central Los Angeles. His multifaceted works, which range from paintings, sculptures and installations to videos all interrogate the state of his country, bringing to the fore its inequalities and racial oppression. He explains, "I wanted abstraction that looked out at the social and political landscape" and indeed his abstract works do "look out at the social and political landscape" by integrating pieces of this landscape onto the

canvas with bits and pieces of found detritus which all spell a culture of dereliction. He presents his art as one of recycling:

> I use material that's loaded and dripping with social, cultural economic material but then I begin the process of sanding, shaving and stripping as much as I can until it's having a conversation about art history and painting. I build up layers upon layers upon layers (20 and 30 and 40 layers) and cut back into them trying to sort of get back to the authentic first thing. (MOCA)

By defining abstraction as an "alchemist's tool", he turns the mundane into the sublime, the individual into the universal or mythical: choosing to use "social, cultural [and] economic material" and making it abstract by literally taking substance out of the canvas, creates a language that is both deeply concrete and abstract, one that refers to individual perceptions and emotions but that also goes beyond the particular to refer to universal emotions. In this light, Bradford's use of his mother's hair salon's materials is more than anecdotal; it evokes the powerful symbol of hairstyles as a political weapon in the African-American context and for example the way Malcolm X described conking his hair in his autobiography as his "first really big step towards self-degradation" (Malcolm X 54). Malcolm X takes an individual anecdote which he turns into a story of political and universal significance, in a way which evokes Bradford's art process. There is a continuity of purpose between Bradford's work, abstract as it is, and his involvement in his community of South Central, where he tutors young people in the arts. Bradford is operating, here, on a pole that is different from Ad Reinhardt's fierce defense of the autonomy of the artwork, its refusal of social connection – and yet both artists turn to abstraction, making it a more complex mode than it might have seemed to its high modernist promoters. Bradford wants the viewers of his work to "have an experience", to feel these objects and for them to impact us, moving us to more awareness and political action.

This is very much in keeping with his work for the Venice Biennale which resorts to Greek mythology in order to abstract his personal experience as is shown for example by the poem "Hephaestus"[4] carved on the outside walls of the pavilion which takes the name of the Greek god of forges and the art of sculpture to lay out an elegy for the dead of the slave trade. The layering of voices is at the heart of all of Bradford's work since all the found material with which he creates each of his pieces is a way of bringing onto the canvas or the sculpture many different realities and stories. These voices are torn and decontextualized, sampled, scavenged, and create a continued dialogue, allowing into the work the expression of many voices and experiences. The works in the show all emphasize the notion of power; some of the sculptures are actually overpowering forms that impose their physical

[4] "I mean nobody likes to admit it –/Somebody threw me out of my house/They told me/They told it was my mama/But let me tell you somethin'/The hands dragging me to the cliff/(And I kept my eyes wide open)/Were not the hands of my mother […]" (Siegel and Bedford, back cover)

presence on the viewer who is forced to make space for the protruding form, and to *feel* the horrors of history embodied in these sculptures. The unrecognizable shapes of the exhibition dominate the viewer in a sublime gesture, where abstraction participates in creating a sense of awe.

Bradford situates the Abstract Expressionists on the side of power ("abstraction is power") and follows in their footsteps to interrogate the power of abstraction to participate in the social and political discussion of contemporary America. His position is evocative of one of his Abstract expressionist forefathers, Robert Motherwell and his *Elegies to the Spanish Republic series*,[5] which mourned the defeated utopian hopes of the Republican side in the Spanish Civil War through the language of abstraction. Here, of course, the non-figurative allowed him to give a figure to the atrocities of the war, precisely through abstraction (instead of Picasso's mythic figurative distortions in *Guernica*, the most famous artwork associated with the Spanish Civil War). It is to this hypothesis – that abstraction has the power to provide a social and political discourse – that I would like to turn to now.

Social Abstraction

One could argue that Bradford's practice and his abundant commentaries on his work participate in the recent discussions on "visual activism", a phrase taken from the South African lesbian photographer Zanele Muholi by critics and curators Julia Bryan-Wilson, Jennifer Gonzàlez and Dominic Willson who define it as an intense "abandonment of neutrality":

> The term visual activism puts pressure on its constitutive words and raises questions about how we define both the regimes of the visible and the boundaries of activism. Can there be invisible activism? Are other senses or modes of perceiving eclipsed in this phrase? […] And does an emphasis on activism imply a straightforward measure of 'effectiveness', as if art had to have a clearly-articulated end-goal and could be judged according to some rigid rubric of failure or success? We think not; rather, we understand *activism* as a word riven by ambiguities, and consider it less in its common usage (to mean active or vigorous campaigning) than to signify the abandonment of neutrality (Bryan-Wilson, 8).

The intensity of Bradford's commitment to finding an effective aesthetic response to the violence of his country against African-Americans shows his refusal to consider abstraction as a neutralizing of affect and his desire to recapture its power. He wants to endow abstraction with the power to affect his viewers and in turn to force them into awareness and, one hopes, action against the hierarchical, racial, and gender divisions of the status quo.

The artist's signature works are mixed media canvases that evoke maps, presenting colored abstract landscapes which bring to mind the layout of the various forms of segregation in Los Angeles. Bradford's L.A. is grounded in the collective

[5] Visible here: https://www.moma.org/collection/works/79007

memory of its riots, and the clichés of destruction that have gone around the world. From the Watts uprising in 1965 to those of 1992 following the acquittal of four L.A. Police Department officers for the beating of Rodney King, the city's visual landscape has been marked by aerial shots mapping destruction and upheaval. As the critic Sebastien Smee notes in the Biennale catalogue, it is this landscape, associated with injustice and protest, that has sparked Bradford's mapmaking (Smee 44). Bradford, in this respect, is working in a line of Los Angeles African-American artists, who emerged in the wake of the riots of '65 and '92 to produce artworks commemorating those revolts and seeking to transform that energy into an aesthetic form that could feed back into the community. In particular, John Outterbridge and Noah Purifoy, who literally used charred materials from the Watts riots for their installations should be mentioned here, because they are artists that Bradford is surely aware of. Working in the same territory, they stand as Californian and African-American counterparts to the New-York Abstract Expressionists in Bradford's own history of American art. If Robert Rauschenberg is an important figure to think about Bradford's shapes abstracted from found objects, especially in the context of the Venice Biennale, it is important to note that his forefathers in this aesthetics of derelict objects and the discourse they spell on the injustices and insurgencies marking the American system are equally these Los Angeles figures.[6]

He explains about his maps: "It's about…tracing the ghost of cities past. It's the pulling off of a layer and finding another underneath" (Bradford, "Market>Place"). Bradford's maps are therefore not diagrammatic representations of an existing space, but commentaries on a context where maps have been used as ways of imposing power over impoverished neighborhoods: maps of freeway networks or estate developments closing in or expropriating whole neighborhoods. His maps reveal an order that represses the violence of that expropriating gesture – that makes it seem automatic and natural. In this way, Bradford reverses the mainstream sense of order and disorder. He suggests it is order that enshrines an original violence, and it is disorder – the Los Angeles revolts – that seeks to expose that violence, to make it seem chosen and unnatural. With his maps, Bradford brings to the discussion of American abstraction a history of inequality and struggles. His map-like abstractions both picture this history and bring forward his central notion that "Maps are nothing but the biggest lies on the planet. They're only the physical manifestation of power" (Hill 27). By making maps unreadable, he disorients his viewers and engages them in a reflection on space and power.

Los Moscos,[7] made in 2004, represents the way Bradford uses a map-like grid to organize his visual space. The canvas seems to suggest an aerial eye view of an urban landscape, yet the title draws us back to thinking about who is doing the viewing and

[6] This "counter art history" has been researched, documented and promoted by art historian Kellie Jones, notably in the exhibition *Now Dig This! Art and Black Los Angeles 1960-1980* that showed at the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles in 2011-12 as well as in the Noah Purifoy exhibition at the Los Angeles County Museum in 2015-16 entitled *Junk Dada* and co-curated by Co-curated by Franklin Sirmans, Terri and Michael Smooke and Yael Lipschutz.

[7] The painting is visible here: https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/bradford-los-moscos-t13701

how it is done – since the title is the Spanish for flies, it evokes the common L.A. sight of police helicopters. The lines leading to the canvas' many centers bring movement and evoke the city's freeway system, a system that was built with little or no African-American input and that has notoriously imposed impassible barriers on certain traditional black neighborhoods carving out enclaves that were formerly connected to the city as a whole. Bradford's *Los Moscos* is also a slang name for the sometimes-illegal immigrant Latino workforce engaged in the everyday work that supports the city – giving us a map of L.A.'s underground economy. Bradford's maps are interestingly non-static; they are a way of reconfiguring social and political geographies – he suggests: "It's actually about us pushing ourselves into the center – alternative voices pushing into the center: women's voices, people who are not deemed proper" (Hill 15). The notion of using art as activism is usually associated with figurative art and its various techniques, from realism to collage. Here, however, Bradford is suggesting that "pushing ourselves into the center" does not necessarily lead to a figurative art, but rather to an oppositional appropriation of the instruments of abstraction. Larne Abse Gogarty has shown how the formless sculptures in the Venice Pavilion mark an "emphasis on feelings […] reaching towards invoking a mass or a hydra-like social form" (Gogarty, 532), showing how abstraction is, for Bradford, much more than a didactic reflection on the violence of American life – although it is that, of course – but also a form of summoning to emancipatory political action. Bradford explores the possibilities of abstraction on canvas, in sculpture and in-situ as in *Tomorrow is Another Day*, his intervention at the Venice Biennale. In this piece, Bradford took over the American Pavilion and made it both the site of an exhibition of abstract paintings and abstract sculptures as well as a testing ground to question the politics of the pavilion itself. Collectively, these works were meant to be experienced as a double-sided journey for the viewer: on the one side, an aesthetic journey into the substance of a rich non-figurative style, and on the other side, as a political journey through the official government building which had been subjected to decay and distortions, as had, one could argue, the material used for his sculptures. In these two instances, Bradford creates a situation of estrangement, in line with the modernist quest for a renewal of perception: awakening the viewer to look at things that have been deadened and become automatic, impacting the audience's physical presence in the building and thus calling for a reappraisal of what it means to be in this official building, in 2017, looking at art in the privileged setting of the Venice Biennale, while experiencing the same harsh conditions that saw the emergence of Bradford's artistic voice.

Bradford's social perspective on abstraction allows him to offer a very forceful response to the dichotomy that was at the heart of the Harlem Renaissance between "pure art", or a formalist approach, and "propaganda" as expressed by W.E.B. Du Bois. Bradford responds in his art to the ills of American society, to which he adds strong engagement as shown by his involvement with foster youth in Los Angeles. His abstractions literally speak the language of inequality as they are made of the detritus of the unequal society they inhabit and reflect. He thus brings his viewers to the heart of this society, not figuratively, but by the direct contact of abstraction.

Abstraction and Affect

Bradford situates his work within the history of American art while adding to it a political bent that has sometimes been absent from it, particularly when one speaks of abstract art. He says: "I'm interested in the history of abstraction, of unpacking the '50s. What does it mean to unpack that moment, when both Jackson Pollock and Emmett Till were on magazine covers?" (Siegel and Bedford 77). Bradford here, I believe, comments on the abstract expressionists' quest for absolute emotion through abstraction, undermining it by referring to Emmett Till's murder. In referring to Emmett Till whose battered body came to be the very image of the failings of the American dream, he reminds us that this crime took place at the same time as the US was promoting its abstract art as a sign of the country's championing of freedom during the cold war. Putting on the same plane the tragedy of Emmett Till's lynching and Pollock's search for pure emotional experience in his drip paintings is a way for Bradford to show that he is looking in his art for a way of protesting his country's socio-economic situation while doing it by exploring the possibilities offered by the canvas. In doing so, he is an inheritor of James Baldwin who explained that "the 'protest novel', far from being disturbing, is an accepted and comforting aspect of the American scene" (Baldwin 22). He defines the protest novel by insisting on its absence of poetry: "The avowed aim of the American protest novel is to bring greater freedom to the oppressed. They are forgiven on the strength of these good intentions, whatever violence they do to language" (Baldwin 22). Baldwin's comparison of aesthetic and political violence evokes the earlier debate between Du Bois and Locke, suggesting that a politically engaged work of art devoid of aesthetic qualities exerts violence. Baldwin here positions himself in a line which I believe Bradford belongs to, by calling for politically and socially engaged art while participating in formalist and aesthetic debates, calling for an end to this separation and a coexistence of these discourses in culture.

The iconic photos representing Emmett Till's battered face played a role in sparking the Civil Rights movement by figuring affect, demonstrating the power of images which Bradford is very conscious of, but which he deliberately situates within abstraction in a gesture which both abstracts reality and also makes it literally the fabric of his works. He situates himself as an artist seeking power in his works, the power to make his audience think about the context in which these images were made. Bradford's installation for the US Pavilion at the Venice Biennale positions itself within the context of American history as it is represented in the institutional building and it also borrows its title from popular, and racist, American culture with the last line of *Gone with the Wind*: "tomorrow is another day". Against this facile optimism Bradford's abstractions point us to a tougher optimism: "I'm interested in the type of abstraction where you look out at the world, see the horror – sometimes it's horror – and drag that horror kicking and screaming into your studio and you wrestle with it and you find something beautiful in it" (Hill 18). Bringing the horror onto the canvas but abstracting it situates Bradford in a very interesting position within American history. He reconciles abstraction and political art and thus creates

a space to think about politics within American art. In continuing with the references to slaveholding, Bradford recognized and exploited the fact that the American Pavilion is built in imitation of Monticello, Thomas Jefferson's slave-built Palladian mansion. Bradford commented: "This a Jeffersonian-type space, something you see in state capitols, […] I wanted it to feel like a ruin, like we went into a governmental building and started shaking the rotunda and the plaster started falling off. Our rage made the plaster fall off the walls" (Bradford, De La Cruz). He let the pavilion deteriorate through neglect and natural processes: weeds, alterations from previous installations left unrepaired, leaving gravel in front of the stately main entrance which remained closed off – visitors were made to enter the majestic building through its side door, in an evocation of spatial segregation. This desacralizing gesture resonates with the intense debate in the United States around the campaign to take down statuary and symbols glorifying the Confederacy which centers around the nation's relationship to history. Bradford's strategy is not to erase the monument, which risks making us forget the injustice that it represents, but rather to ruin the monument to keep it in an in-between state, in the process of decaying.

Bradford's exhibition is to be seen as an installation piece taking the viewer on a mythical journey through the official building. The viewer first encounters a poem written for the occasion, which sets in stone on the wall of the official building, the story of slavery: "The lust of these men would only be / Satisfied by black gold and the new world…"; the main entrance having been blocked off, the viewers enter through the side door and find themselves in a space occupied by gigantic sculptures such as *Spoiled Foot, Oracle or Medusa*, which are posed near abstract paintings made of hundreds of collaged permanent-wave end papers. Bradford's outsized sculptures make physical demands on the body of the viewer, who, to get past them, must bend a little. Inducing this physical awkwardness underlines their importance in carrying out the theme of ruin and decay; the body of the viewer is directly impacted, as were the bodies that once built the ante-bellum structures. The spectator experiences the space, channels the emotions it invokes – claustrophobia, menace, indignation, etc. – instead of simply knowing it on an intellectual level. The response demanded is firstly mimetic, not cognitive. Huey Copeland described the experience of engaging Bradford's work as "multisensory": "the paintings are so tactile and so bodily, involving various senses in their address to and conscription of the viewer" (Copeland 816). The works depend on affect as it is defined by Brian Massumi as "irreducibly bodily and autonomic" (Leys 437), but follow Ruth Leys' exploration of affect theories in making space for social and political action. Oracle, in the rotunda, is placed under a ceiling that is layered with differently hued coils of rolled black, brown and gold bleached paper, which are woven into a sort of reverse maelstrom, giving a feeling of some massive waste, in stark contrast to the majestic lines that the rotunda aspires to. The viewer might well ask, at this point, if Bradford's notion of ruin doesn't lead to hopelessness. Is waste all there is?

This point of seemingly no return should lead us back to Bradford's borrowing from *Gone with the Wind*: "tomorrow is another day." By juxtaposing Thomas Jefferson and *Gone with the Wind*, Bradford plays with a type of the American

"innocence" James Baldwin indicted, one that does not include a consciousness of slavery and its fundamental relationship to the history of the American achievement. The title is therefore a commentary on a quintessential expression of optimism – of building from the ruins – while refusing to understand the moral issues involved in the process of ruination. We should remember to tacitly put Margaret Mitchell's hopefulness in contact with the politics of "hope" – the "Yes, we can" – of the Obama campaign, and the idea that Obama's election represented a "post-racial moment" – a hope that feels more than exaggerated today. The exhibition however does offer its own version of American optimism, in an ironic twist of the *Gone with the Wind* reference, with the final video entitled *Niagara* which shows a young boy walking towards the future in full vulnerability, bringing to mind the context that has led to the Black Lives Matter movement, but also evoking a possible future and promise.

The appropriation of the *Gone with the Wind* line, and the recognition of the slave-built origins of America's paradigm of noble architecture, alert us to the fact that the installation is historically sensitive in a way we more usually associate with figuration. Here, the device inverts the traditional, straightforward American story. It is Bradford's most radical work, in a sense – in the etymological sense of radical, "root" – for here Bradford's deeper text is the American revolution as it both founded the country and endured in myth as a legitimating tool for white rule. Yet the African-American response to that has always been in a dialectical relationship with the Revolution – on the one hand, the universal principles that have been claimed, as well, by black civil rights leaders; and on the other hand, the real consequences of that national founding, the perpetuation of a separate but unequal state for Black America. Mixing *Gone with the Wind* and the Declaration of Independence, a gesture reminiscent of that of a hip-hop musician mixing two different tunes, gives us an interesting tool to think about the notion of revolution in American art and culture today.

Conclusion

One of Bradford's map-like canvases encapsulates well how he conceives of abstraction as an aesthetic as well as a political weapon. *Scorched Earth* was made in 2015 for the Hammer Museum[8] and reflects on the 1921 Tulsa race riots which are well-known in African-American memory, although they were ignored by mainstream historiography until recently.[9] In 1921, the Black Community in Tulsa was the most prosperous in the nation due to oil wealth and the Greenwood neighborhood came to be known as the Black Wall Street. It was destroyed by white riots, its businesses burnt, its people massacred. The charcoal-black extending in a

[8] The work can be seen on the Hammer Museum's webpage: https://hammer.ucla.edu/exhibitions/2015/mark-bradford-scorched-earth/

[9] It must be noted that the city of Tulsa was awarded a $1 million from the "Bloomberg Philanthropies 2018 Public Art Challenge" for "The Greenwood Art Project" which will commemorate the city's tragedy through public artworks.

band over the lower part of the picture gives it a dreadful, dead look, familiar from aerial shots of forest fires. Here, the evocation of a map allows for mourning on a collective scale and creates at the same time a space for the destroyed neighborhood. The emotional resonances of Bradford's use of maps as an underlying principle for his abstractions erases the neutrality of maps, creating a memorial, bringing trauma to the canvas' surface and calling our attention to space as politics. In doing so, he asks his viewers to look at the gaps of historiography, both the history of political moments, such as the Tulsa riots, and the history of art, using abstraction as an entry-point into action and, in the process, opening a discussion on the political potentialities of abstraction.

Bradford's work is addressed to the politics of abstraction not only in the history of American art, but in the history of America's social relations. One tendency that came out of abstract expressionism was in the spirit of Ad Reinhardt's claim to an ever purer, an ever more de-contextualized art – which resonated with a certain form of conceptualism in the seventies and eighties. Another tendency, revived by artists like Bradford, is to press on the expressionistic gesture, bringing back affect as a politically signifying phenomenon. Where a painter like Jackson Pollock turned to archetypal symbols and myth, Bradford has turned to endpapers and maps, to the quotidian and the social abstractions in which whole populations are controlled. His work makes a claim on the high modernist moment of American abstraction, with its tendency to a conceptualism that negates the art object's context, creating works that create affect and impact us physically with their scale, rhythm and overpowering effect. At the same time, his works allow for a rational response which seeks political action out of this affect. Bradford responds to the "relationless" definition of abstraction as that given by Reinhardt by claiming its heritage, but he also points to the shortcomings of this very heritage; in so doing, he makes abstraction into a language which is both formal and politically charged and probably best suited to confront his country's socio-political injustices as well as its openness to formal explorations.

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