



“Close-Up On Art”

By T Santora, November 2, 2016

Title: *Rat Catcher of Hamelin IV*, 2011
Artist: Mark Bradford, American, born 1961
2012 museum purchase
Medium: Mix media collage on canvas
Produced in Leimert Park (Los Angeles), CA
Category: Contemporary art

Born in 1961, Mark Bradford is considered one of the most influential artists of his generation. Bradford came of age as a young black, gay man in the Leimert Park neighborhood of South Central Los Angeles. The area has long been a cultural enclave of middle class African Americans in the City’s otherwise poor south side. He remains deeply influenced by the charged social realities of the milieu he lived in. His work reflects his deep sense of community instilled by the overwhelming intensity of the 1980’s AIDS epidemic and the racial upheavals following the Rodney King beating in 1992. This intensity permeates his art.

Bradford earned his BFA in 1995 and MFA in 1997 from the California Institute of the Arts in Valencia, CA. His signature collage process abstracts the geographic, political, and socioeconomic landscape. He composes his works on canvas by affixing found materials such as the billboard remnants used in *Rat Catcher of Hamelin IV*. The detritus that clings to the city are repurposed and provide much of his resource material. Paper replaces paint and is often torn, glued, sanded and scraped away revealing layers of color, text and images.

Rat Catcher of Hamelin IV is the 4th section of a four-panel painting conceived as a response to what Bradford viewed as a callous disregard for the privacy of the women whom had been stalked and photographed by the serial killer who became known as the “Grim Sleeper”. He used the scraped remains of these billboards to transform and recontextualize them. It’s use exemplifies Bradford’s philosophy and approach to art. As he describes it, “My process is to decollage and collage at the same time. . . I put up so I can tear down. . . In archeological terms, I excavate and build at the same time.”¹ While formally furthering the legacy of abstract expressionist innovators such as Rauschenberg and Basquiat, Bradford’s work has a unique cartographic quality that visualizes how communities are mapped, quantified and stratified.

While I did not know him personally, Bradford was both a contemporary and neighbor of mine following his move to Santa Monica, CA in 1972. His work generally, and this piece specifically, display the tragically exquisite beauty of decay. A beauty instantly recognizable to one who has lived in a vast, deteriorating landscape like that found in L.A. One comes to understand and appreciate the subtlety of what lies beneath that jagged and often menacing surface.

Sources: 1.) Steven A. Nash, Daniell Cornell, Christine Giles, Mara Gladstone and Katherine Plake Hough; *75 Years 75 Artworks: Selections from the Permanent Collection, Celebrating the Diamond Anniversary of Palm Springs Art Museum*, December 1, 2013.
2.) Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis: *Artist Talk: Mark Bradford*; Uploaded to YouTube May 12, 2016 - <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mla8koxLeCM>>
3.) Donielle Kaufman, *Mark Bradford: Cartographer of Capitalism*, Uploaded to YouTube December 14, 2009 – <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bikVDCp5wnI>>

¹ Donielle Kaufman, *Mark Bradford: Cartographer of Capitalism*