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Mark Bradford- Very Powerful Lords (2003). Mixed media installation. The Whitney Museum of American Art at Altria, New York. Courtesy of Lombard-Fried Fine Arts, New York.



Mark Bradford, The Devil is beating his wife, 2003, The Whitney Museum of American Art at Altria, NY. Courtesy Lombard Freid fine arts.

## Mark Bradford

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By Carolee Thea

The Los Angeles artist, Mark Bradford disturbs the barriers between art, politics, his inner life and social concerns. Functioning as both artist and cultural historian, he addresses his external environment as an articulation of the aspects of a city's migrating-merging identities. Not the first artist to deal with issues of identity, he also reveals a segment of contemporary black culture in which the viewer is reminded that their views emanate from perspectives grounded in myth, bias and identity construction.

Armed with a BFA, MA and a beauty operator's license, the artist negotiates a space between high and low art. His signature paintings evoke the formal aspects of modernist art history sharing the concerns of artists like Agnes Martin and Ellen Gallagher, but are firmly rooted in the grid-based circuits of modern metropolis and the urban materials of his Los Angeles community. These works incorporate layers of signed permanent press end papers with synthetic hair dyes, polymer or cellophane, to create translucent and luminous washes of color. The final grid paintings are manifestations of these "hybridites" but with the pentimenti of signage and posters on city walls, of print media and magazines.

By employing a 20th century formal aesthetic, Bradford attempts to encroach on its sanctity. As all of his works evolve from urban interactions, racial barriers, the polemics of black culture and the invasion of the newer ethnic merchants, the idea of encroachment as a social transitive, replicates the transpositioning of ethnicities in his neighborhood. As beauty operator, Bradford is involved with ethnicity, beauty, artifice, ritual and process. And although awkward compared to his paintings, his sculptures and mixed media installations further involve the viewer in a giddy dissection of metaphoric social references.

At the Miami-Based Art fair 2002 Bradford, joined by his hairdresser mother and his aunt, turned the gallery's exhibition space (a container on the beach) into a replica of a hair salon. Privileging us with a look into this segment of contemporary black culture, adventuring, (mostly white) art goes signed up for hairstyles and accompanying conversation. The audience participation enlivened the work/event, categorizing it as an example of "relational aesthetics."

In the fall of 2003, at the Whitney Museum's satellite gallery, Altria, Bradford's installation, Very Powerful Lords, made up a number of sculptures was dominated by one huge painting entitled, The Devil Beating His Wife. Comprised of overlapping commercial signage, the final layer of translucent blacks and yellows, was drawn from the materials of police barriers or construction sites. For Bradford, rewriting - reenacted in the peeling and scraped signage- is an expression of the increasing hybrid manifestations of his community.

Among the mixed media works as, Water lilies, was made up of a wall of shelves displaying water bottles adorned with silver champagne tags. The work's repetitive aspect is not dissimilar to the strategy used by Andreas Gursky, Sven Pahlson and others, who often portray stock shelving in aisles of commodities and icons in dizzying array of consumer culture.

2 faced, likewise raises questions of class and aesthetics the manifestation of nature and culture, reality and artifice. Six identically mirrored light boxes depicted an idealized artificial landscape center on a waterfall. Backlit, mirrored and motorized, they suggest the endless cascades of a fountain of youth and beauty (a cultural construction). The reflective surfaces of the boxes reference Narcissus and the Lacanian mirror stage, to provide an external image that gives rise to a mental representation dependent on recognition. The original light box was one that Bradford found in a restaurant, but it had been replaced by a newer owner. Undaunted, he located others in a storage facility. The work then became a simulacrum for a

castoff society, as well as one of social displacement within a multicultural society.

Bradford's investigation expanded beyond a racially specific opposition, addressing the hybrid cultural and economic exchange of Asian and Latino communities in Los Angeles. In *China Silk*, woven Chinese hair (the predominant source of hair extensions), which is generally imported and sold by Korean immigrant merchants to Black and Korean American women, evokes the cultural and economic exchange of Asian, Black and Latino communities in L.A. Another work, *Hooked Up*, consists of three read-made plaster sculptures of identical hands clasped in prayer. Adorned with artificial nail tips, each hand is painted to depict different ethnic groups, while appropriating a form of black embellishment; one all white, another with a dominant red African design and another in yellow.

In the diptych, *Asian Man and Crow*, Bradford employs a statue he found in the stalls of a Korean merchant. Smaller than life sized, the Asian man is dressed in white (martial-arts cum Buddhist priest) with his hands in a welcoming posture. The Asian gesture is, ironically, a reversal of the subservient posture of the black lawn jockey. A taxidermied black crow high up on the wall refers to Jim Crow- a minstrel show character as well as the Jim Crow laws.

With *Very Powerful Lords*, Bradford creates a total environment for the viewer to enter and to move through fluidly between inside and outside, reality, artifice and local materiality in order to express the trade structures of contemporary LA. The ethnic flow characterizes the intermixing of economies among different communities in relationship to larger trade models of a capitalist system. His work, also grounded in an empathetic relationship with the notion of beauty and power that governs all of our lives, encourages us to reflect on our own personal engagement with those Powerful Lords and the world that has defined history.

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