

ART INNOVATOR

# MARK BRADFORD

2017

After a blockbuster presentation at the 57th Venice Biennale, the acclaimed artist prepares to exhibit a 400-foot painting—his largest work to date—at the Hirshhorn Museum.

BY HOWIE KAHN PHOTOGRAPHY BY SAM CONTIS

**M**ARK BRADFORD'S studio is housed in a 50,000-square-foot former metal-manufacturing facility on an industrial street in South Los Angeles. It neighbors a recycling plant, a big-rig trucking school and a fabric mill specializing in webbing. Fitting company, since Bradford's own art production depends on industrial materials and tools. His supply room features a wall of Makita power grinders, floor-to-ceiling boxes packed with tubes of acrylic latex caulk and stacks of printing paper in colors like Blast-Off Blue, Eclipse Black and Pulsar Pink. Above his studio's front door hangs a sign left by a previous tenant. In all caps, facing the street, it reads MEGA M, as if signaling the immensity of what's happening inside. Bradford's latest work, made up of eight canvases, each 40 to 50 feet long and 12 feet high, hangs on various walls throughout the studio. Nearly completed, the panels exude their own gravity; they waste no time pulling a viewer close. Bradford, 55, calls the piece *Pickett's Charge*, named for a watershed moment during the Battle of Gettysburg, marking the Confederacy's deepest penetration into the North and a failed offense, led by Major General George E. Pickett, that historians cite as a turning point in the Civil War. "If they had broken the Union during that charge, they might have won," Bradford says.

Recently Bradford installed the canvases at the Hirshhorn Museum in Washington, D.C., on the National Mall, a mile and a half from the White House.

They debut this month in the form of a cyclorama, a continuous, 360-degree art-viewing experience that will wrap completely around one of the museum's circular Inner Ring galleries. This style of monumental art was popularly employed in the late 19th century as a type of immersive entertainment, often focused on the acts and outcomes of recent wars.

Bradford, who is 6-foot-8, is known for his large-scale works, but *Pickett's Charge*, with a circumference of 400 feet, is his largest to date. He undertakes big projects not only for the sake of expressing big ideas, but also for the sake of his own experience as an artist. "I like to fall into a painting," he says. "Little ones get finished too fast." Bradford calls pieces like *Pickett's Charge*, which he's been working on for more than two years, paintings because he manipulates colors on a canvas to a painterly effect—from a distance, viewers might think they see brush strokes: some urgent and tight, others sweeping and lush. But there's no paint present.

Getting up close betrays Bradford's signature technique, which begins with gluing multiple layers of wet paper in different hues and configurations to a canvas. Some pieces of paper are first wrapped around rope and bleached for varying lengths of time. Bradford then hoses the paper off when the desired color is reached and hangs it to dry before ultimately fixing it to the composition. He has also embedded a halftone reproduction of French artist Paul Philippoteaux's cyclorama, *The Battle of Gettysburg*, completed in 1883 and praised for its realism, into his



**STROKE OF GENIUS**  
Scenes from abstract artist Mark Bradford's studio in South Los Angeles.

massive work of abstraction—parts of soldiers and munitions peek through Bradford's collage.

After applying 10 or more layers, Bradford goes at them with his Makita, sanding and grinding them away. He rips at the surface with his bare hands. He ignites a blowtorch and scorches select areas.

Through his laborious process, Bradford has created, in his words, “a cyclorama of political and historical palimpsest.” The surfaces of *Pickett's Charge* resemble wounds and scars. Much of the painting looks like it's been on fire or still is. Clusters of warmer colors (reds, oranges) signal warning while fields of cooler ones (blues, greens) proffer a dreamlike possibility of calm and recovery. It all references the current political climate in America and the deepening ideological divide between liberals and conservatives that plays out like an ongoing battle. “We are obsessed with our differences, but we have to find the commonalities,” says Bradford. “That's a painful word people don't want to talk about in America right now, but our commonality can't be that we hate. That's not good enough for me. I've never had it easy. But I have always had hope.”

**R**AISED IN THE West Adams section of Los Angeles during a period of decline, Bradford was a fixture in his mother's hair salon for as long as he can remember. He also recalls being targeted by neighborhood homophobes who labeled him a “sissy” as early as 6. “Being called a sissy never bothered me,” Bradford says. “I never felt like a sissy. I never felt unmanly. I actually felt strong. The problem was being beaten up; the problem was that I could lose my life.” When Bradford was 11, his mother, Janice, moved their family to Santa Monica, where it was safer but predominantly white. “I was always aware of my differences,” Bradford says. After high school, he went to work styling hair in his mother's salon full time. He stopped working there for good in his early 40s but will still cut hair for close friends. “They'll just drop by the studio,” he says. “I have clippers here. You might hear somebody knocking on the door today. People come by and I'm like, *Really, girl?*”

Still, Bradford has a way of treating the people he meets as if they've booked an appointment in his erstwhile chair. He'll tell stories and draw them out. He'll tell you his first artistic role model was his mother. He'll tell you he lost nothing by never knowing his father. (“I believe your family is the people who love you.”) He will hypothesize about *Game of Thrones*. (“The Night King? He has an ice dragon. He might win.”) He'll tell you that he and his partner of 20 years, Allan DiCastro, live in a Victorian house on the same street as the boarding house where he grew up and made his first artworks, staging plays and operas on the house's landing. He will sing the lyrics to a song over and over until he finally remembers the name of the person who performed it. “We don't have to take our clothes off,” he'll repeat until recalling: “Jermaine Stewart!”

The mention of Stewart, an R&B singer and a *Soul Train* dancer, begins to explain why Bradford's career as an artist started later than most. The two men knew each other from the L.A. club scene in

the early 1980s, a time Bradford associates with the rise of AIDS. Stewart eventually died of AIDS-related causes. At one point, Bradford remembers a doctor telling him he would inevitably contract the disease. “I had to figure out a strategy for surviving this plague,” Bradford says. What he came up with was saving enough money from his mother's salon to decamp to Europe because “it felt way safer.”

He stayed in Europe, traveling aimlessly, first in Amsterdam and then Spain and Greece, until the money ran out; later he came home, earned more at the salon and repeated the process. Bradford lived itinerantly for about a decade before he felt safe calling California home for good. Once the traveling stopped, he spent a large part of the '90s working in the salon and studying as an undergrad and then as a graduate student at CalArts. After completing his master's, he went back to the salon but also got a studio in nearby Inglewood, where he created his early abstractions.

For Bradford, oil paints were too expensive, so he began working with the materials around him instead. He took the endpapers he'd typically use to wrap hair during chemical treatments and applied them to bedsheets he used as canvases. “I found myself getting lost in the material,” he says. “Five dollars for a box of a thousand. I could afford to mess up.” Bradford made money off his work for the first time in 2001, selling his earliest endpaper pieces to the Watts-born collector and philanthropist Eileen Harris Norton. “I remember telling my mother I sold one of these paintings for \$5,000,” Bradford says. “And she said, ‘You sold a painting for \$5,000?’ I said, ‘Yeah, girl. I think we found a way out of the beauty shop.’” Since then, Bradford has won a MacArthur “genius grant” and a Medal of Arts from the U.S. Department of State. His 2013 mixed-media work, *Constitution IV*, sold at auction for over \$5 million, and he was a favorite artist of the Obama White House.

Bradford's work has carried social themes throughout his career. Advertisements collected around South Los Angeles (Bradford calls them “merchant posters”) have been employed in his mixed-media pieces to illuminate what constitutes business in low-income areas. “Is This Child Yours? DNA Testing,” reads one poster-based painting from 2006. In 2008, Bradford installed *Mithra*, a 70-foot-long ark in New Orleans's Lower Ninth Ward, a largely black and poor section of the city that was ravaged by Hurricane Katrina in 2005 and still recovering three years later. Other large-scale paintings made by Bradford have used abstraction, color and a style of imaginary mapping to revisit race riots and commemorate AIDS victims. “He somehow, over his career, has assumed a position that feels like he's in space looking down on us while also burrowing into our bodies,” says Christopher Bedford, the director of the Baltimore Museum of Art, who first met Bradford over a decade ago while working as an assistant curator at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art.

Bedford is in part responsible for 2017 being

Bradford's banner year. Along with art historian and curator Katy Siegel, he approached the artist in 2015 with the idea of nominating him to represent the U.S. at this year's Venice Biennale. Bradford recalls feeling like a long shot. “I thought there was no way,” he says. In May, his exhibition *Tomorrow Is Another Day* opened in Italy (the show runs through November 26). It plumbs ideas and news surrounding something Bradford has a lifetime of experience with: being black in America. “I was responding to all of the police killings, acquittals and Black Lives Matter protests,” says Bradford. “Racially, I thought we were going into serious collapse.”

The U.S. Pavilion in Venice opened in 1930 and was made to look like Monticello, Thomas Jefferson's estate in Virginia. Bradford didn't want to merely hang work in it; he wanted to respond to the architecture and intervene with what motivated its design. “It's a slave owner's building,” Bradford says. To prepare for the exhibition, he built a full-scale model of the 4,090-square-foot pavilion in a warehouse in L.A., about three miles from his studio. The work he conceived there, and ultimately installed in Venice, includes sev-

eral paintings over 12 feet in length and an imposing free-standing sculpture of gnarled, painted-paper husks called *Medusa*. Bradford covered the building's stately, soaring rotunda with a merchant poster-inspired work; the words *Receive Calls on Your Cellphone From Jail* arc overhead. Entering the pavilion requires an encounter with *Spoiled Foot*, a three-dimensional metastatic bulge descending from the ceiling and filling nearly an entire room. Viewers have to squeeze by its contours, avoiding its papery stubble. It's meant to be uncomfortable.

While there's a severity to the work and an urgency to respond to the injustices that inform it, Bradford brings a sense of geniality and inclusion wherever he goes. “What added to the opening of the pavilion in Venice,” says Melissa Chiu, director of the Hirshhorn Museum, “was that Mark was right out front greeting people. It's highly unusual for an artist to do that in Venice. Most are exhausted or on the shy side, but there was Mark...somehow creating a very welcoming environment.”

When Bedford first visited Bradford's studio in 2006—it was much smaller than the behemoth space Bradford occupies today—he recalls similarly being struck by the artist's “radiating warmth.” Even more surprising was the way Bradford immediately changed Bedford's mind about an entire artistic genre. “I walked into Mark's studio and saw these truly astonishing floor-to-ceiling paintings, the likes of which I'd never seen before,” Bedford says. “That was that moment where I realized I had miscalculated the possibility of painting completely. I sensed at that point that Mark would be one of the greatest artists of his generation, which has actually happened.”

Bradford is often mentioned in the same art historical breath as Jackson Pollock and Robert Rauschenberg for the emotionality he brings to

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**DOWN TO A FINE ART**  
Two panels (left and bottom) from Bradford's 400-foot painting suite, *Pickett's Charge*, and panels from his unfinished work *The Constitution* (right), commissioned for the new United States Embassy in London.

abstraction and his ability to create enduring social commentary with found materials. Bedford, however, says Bradford has disrupted art history completely. “He has forced curators, museums and scholars to reconsider the canon of abstraction to account for his existence,” Bedford says. “We as institutions are now exploring a history of African-American abstraction that was never really part of the art historical canon before.”

But Bradford's art will be only part of his legacy. In 2014 he opened the nonprofit Art + Practice along with DiCastro and Harris Norton. It's located in the South Central Los Angeles community of Leimert Park, near where Bradford grew up and still lives. The organization has grown into a 20,000-square-foot campus spread across two blocks, including the building that was once Bradford's mother's salon. Art + Practice offers public exhibitions from prominent and emerging artists and conversations with artists, curators and writers. It also provides counseling and job training services for foster youth. Bradford sees it all as part of his social contract with his community and the world. “You cannot go to communities that have urgency and need and tell them that the best thing in the world for them is art

and literature,” Bradford says. “That's part of it, but not all.”

Ari Emanuel, co-CEO of Hollywood mega agency WME/IMG, sits on the board of Art + Practice and owns several Bradford works. He sees Bradford not only as a gifted artist, but as a crusader for social justice. “Mark doesn't sit back idly,” he says. “He puts his money where his mouth is. Whether it be foster kids or society as a whole, he cares about the issues.”

And earlier this year, in Venice, Bradford coupled the opening of his show at the U.S. Pavilion with the establishment of Process Collettivo, an initiative to help Italian inmates find meaningful work after they are released. For Bradford, expanding his outreach is as important as expanding the scope of his art. Bedford, who will bring *Tomorrow Is Another Day* to Baltimore in the fall of 2018, is looking forward to having Bradford's social engagement there as much as his work. “Now people anticipate both sides of Mark Bradford,” he says. “This is a man who can effect meaningful and lasting change.”

Out on the floor of the studio, Bradford shows me another new work made up of 32 10-foot-by-10-foot panels. He says he'll install them in the new United States Embassy in London when it opens (the date has

not yet been confirmed). Collectively, the work, titled *The Constitution*, bears a portion of the text from its preamble in block letters. “I wanted to go back to the important documents—they're the root of everything we're debating,” Bradford says, before taking one more pass along the length of *Pickett's Charge*.

“I don't think it's done,” he says, shaking his head, standing in front of a section of multicolor waves. He rips off a foot-long swath of yellow-pink material revealing darker matter beneath and slaps at the canvas approvingly. “That's what it needs,” he says. “Some air.” Bradford quickly spots another area to address and rushes over. He's moving fast now, widening his gait, letting his arms swing as he walks. He swaggers as he tears more away from the work, peeling back 10, 15, 20 feet of sinewy yellow and black. He's rough with it. Art, the way he sees it, is never precious.

“Better,” says Bradford, “better,” wagging his finger at the canvas. He takes in the undulating shapes and colors, the layers, his last two years of work. “I've always thought that the next whatever could be better. I've always had that. The next painting. The next haircut. The next city I visit. I'm very future-oriented,” he says. “Tomorrow is going to be better.” ●