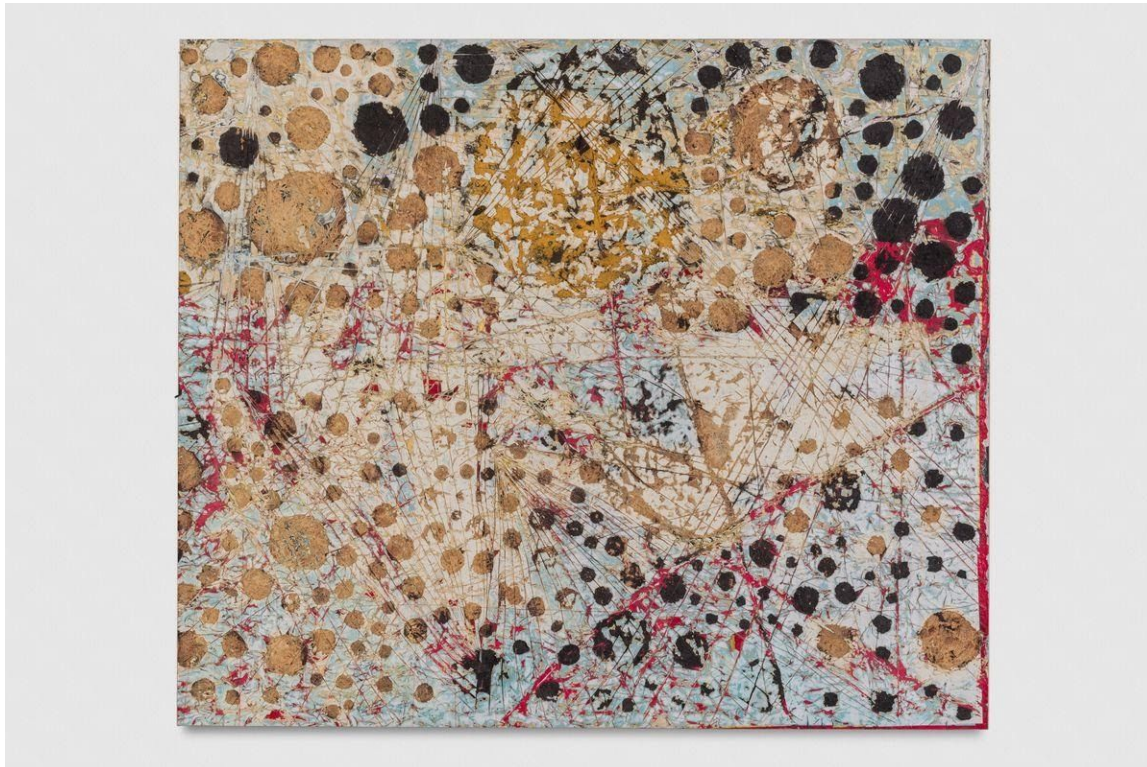


Mark Bradford: Feel the Color

Last summer, I fell in love with a work of art. Tucked away at the back of a gallery in the contemporary wing of the Baltimore Museum of Art hung one of the museum's most recent acquisitions, *My Grandmother Felt the Color*. The large abstraction called to me, drawing me past other works of equal scale. It insisted that I look at it again and again. Whenever I could, I made a visit to the contemporary galleries at the BMA, specifically to see this piece with the hope that it was still there. I feared that one day it would be gone, either put back into storage or lent to another museum for an exhibition. Every time I found it, a sense of relief flowed over me. Each viewing of *My Grandmother Felt the Color* confirmed my connection with the picture, though did nothing to help me explain it rationally.



MARK BRADFORD (American, b. 1961)

My Grandmother Felt the Color, 2016
Mixed media on canvas

Mark Bradford, a contemporary American artist whose star is on the rise, completed *My Grandmother Felt the Color* in 2016. Born in Los Angeles in 1961, Bradford is a graduate of the California Institute of the Arts in Valencia, where he earned his BFA and MFA. Bradford [has referred](#) to his work as “social abstraction” (a term he coined), meaning abstract art “with a social or political context clinging to the edges.” Social abstraction builds upon the established history of abstract painting but with an eye towards social and political content. Bradford sees

himself as continuing the legacy of Abstract Expressionists like Jackson Pollock and Willem de Kooning, albeit in a contemporary context. But unlike these earlier artists, Bradford is black and gay. And although this may seem like extraneous information, these facts are integral to his practice and persona.

Not only does Bradford's biography differ from these earlier giants of postwar American abstraction, so does his medium. Technically, Bradford is not a painter at all, but rather a sort of collagist whose work is composed of found materials like old posters and flyers culled from the neighborhood around his studio. Through a complex process of layering and sanding, Bradford "paints" these materials into compelling abstractions.

At 132 x 156 inches, *My Grandmother Felt the Color* dominated the space in which it was hung, pulling my attention away from even larger works, partly due to its location at the end of the gallery. As I turned the corner to enter the space, I was immediately confronted with Bradford's composition. Long irregular lines run diagonally across the picture plane in all directions, seemingly scratching its surface, crisscrossing each other over the face of the painting. These vigorous marks give the painting depth and energy, pulling the canvas in all directions. Meanwhile, beige and dark blue circles float through the composition. In the top and bottom right of the painting, these round forms darken as if in the night sky reflected in water. A horizontal band of almost raw canvas at the very bottom of the picture gives the impression that *My Grandmother Felt the Color* was re-stretched after the initial rendering. This last-minute edit suggests the touch-and-go process of gestural abstraction.

While looking at Bradford's *My Grandmother Felt the Color*, I was reminded of bell hooks' essay "An Aesthetic of Blackness: Strange and Oppositional" (1995). In this pertinent text, which deftly alternates between subjective memories and critical theory, hooks explains how the Black Arts Movement, an artistic outgrowth of the Black Power movement prominent in the 1960s and '70s, resisted abstraction in favor of social realism. She writes:

The assumption that naturalism or realism was more accessible to a mass audience than abstraction was certainly not a revolutionary position. Indeed, the paradigms for artistic creation offered by the Black Arts Movement were most often restrictive and disempowering. They stripped many artists of creative agency by dismissing and devaluing their work because it was either too abstract or did not overtly address a radical politic.

Here, hooks condemns the notion that postwar black artists should have rejected abstraction. However, her essay is even more persuasive for the inclusion of her personal anecdotes. The whole piece begins with a brief epigraph of how her grandmother, Baba, taught her about aesthetics.

Look, she tells me, what the light does to color! Do you believe that space can give life, or take it away, that space has power? These are the questions she asks which frighten me. Baba dies an old woman, out of place. Her funeral is also a place to see things, to recognize myself. How can I be sad in the face of death, surrounded by so much beauty? Death, hidden in a field of tulips, wearing my face and calling my name. Baba in a

swoon, tulips everywhere. Here a soul on fire with beauty burns and passes, a soul touched by flame. We see her leave. She has taught me how to look at the world and see beauty. She has taught me “we must learn to see.”

It is these more poignant tracts of hooks’ essay that resonate with me when looking at Bradford’s picture. And it is the idea that “we must learn to see” that compelled me to write these words.

My Grandmother Felt the Color is an offshoot of a larger body of work, *Tomorrow is Another Day*, Bradford’s exhibition for the U.S. Pavilion at the 2017 Venice Biennale. Co-sponsored by the Baltimore Museum of Art and the Rose Art Museum at Brandeis University, Bradford was selected to represent the United States at the oldest and most prestigious international exhibition of contemporary art in the world. If you missed the Venice show, however, you will have a second chance to see the exhibition, as it will be installed at the BMA from September 2018 through January 2019. Unfortunately, *My Grandmother Felt the Color* is no longer on view at the BMA and will not be exhibited with *Tomorrow is Another Day*, though it is being considered for inclusion in an exhibition scheduled to open in July 2019. Until then, I will have to wait.

Like all powerful works of art, *My Grandmother Felt the Color* transcends simple categorization—not to mention its own individual parts—to become something far greater and infinitely more complex. It defies logical interpretation. Words only go so far in explaining how art works. I could never fully explain to someone who dislikes this picture just why it is that I love it. But I have tried with my words to make them wonder, to open their eyes and, as Bradford’s grandmother did, *feel the color*.

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