

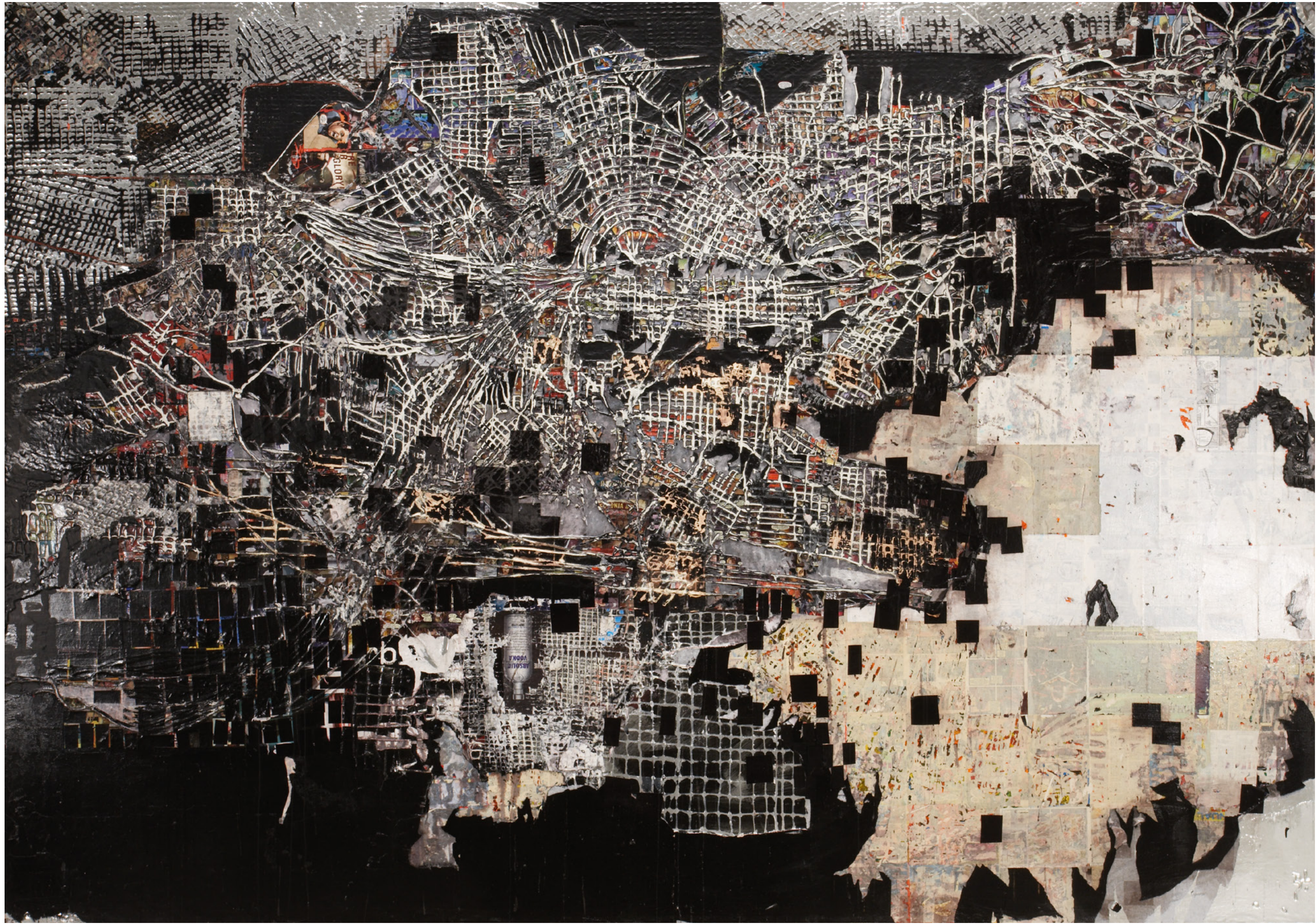
MARK BRADFORD

Interview Finn Blythe

Somewhere between collage and abstract painting, the tactile, laborious surfaces of Mark Bradford's work embody the violence and scenes of trauma they often depict. From the US invasion of Iraq to the Battle of Gettysburg, HIV and Hurricane Katrina, the lacerations and lesions that punctuate his dense, excavated canvases are as intensely visceral as they are political.

While his practice has grown to encompass sculpture, installation and video, Bradford first gained national attention in 2001 with his layered, monochrome works, made with hair-curling endpapers from his mother's salon in which he once worked. Since then, he has continued to harvest material from the streets of his native south LA, from posters to billboards, mapping the city's social history and urban geography with its own corporeal matter.

*Cerberus is Bradford's first exhibition at Hauser & Wirth in London and a continuation of his enduring interest in mythology. The hound of Hades and guard of the underworld sets an appropriate metaphorical tone for nine new paintings that visualise explosive urban unrest with densely scarred canvases. These map-like aerial perspectives appear as apocalyptic landscapes of miasmic colour and interconnected webs, informed by LA's infamous Watts Riots that raged for six days in 1965 following an incident of police brutality. Like Martha & The Vandella's civil rights anthem, *Dancing in the Street* (a live performance of which is projected onto LA's streets for the exhibition's new film), *Cerberus* is a mobilising reminder of the conflict that arises at borders and the need to remain vigilant over those who patrol them.*





FINN BLYTHE Mythology permeates so much of your work, from the Medusa sculpture and Siren paintings at the 2017 Venice Biennial to *Mithra* for New Orleans’ Prospect and now *Cerberus*. Where did your interest in mythology begin?

MARK BRADFORD There’s always a lot of narratives floating out there, especially of urban-ness, race and gender – big monolithic, non-moving things. So how do I navigate around that and create spaces where I work things out around race and class for myself, slowly? Not wanting to shy away from those sites but wanting to do them on my own terms. When I got out of school, my studio *was* in South Central, and I *am* black and I *was* a hairstylist – I am all this stuff. So I said, “You know what? I’m going to go into abstraction. I’m interested in all these things, but I’m going to use abstraction as a container to work out these ideas.” In some ways I think I use mythology in the same way. Finding these places that point to something else to work out something else [laughs]. Does that make sense?

FINN It’s like a vehicle that helps you move laterally between connected ideas.

MARK Right, exactly. I’m interested in things that I’m interested in. I don’t shy away from something because I’m afraid it’s going to be a huge tidal wave that will sweep me under. It’s almost like surfing. You know, I grew up in Santa Monica, and sometimes you just got to get up on it and ride that wave, man [laughs]. That’s sometimes how I feel when it’s a hot topic, I’m like, “WOAHH, ride it, ride it, ride it.” I don’t know why that analogy came to my head but it is kinda true: if you don’t ride it, you go under. And you know what? You wipe out. I did it, but that’s cool. So for me as a kid, I really thought this mythology was real, nobody said it wasn’t.

FINN In terms of these new works, how pervasive is the metaphor of Cerberus as a gatekeeper between two realms?

MARK I would say that’s me directly responding to the climate we’re all living in and this super, über frightening swing towards the right – they’re just prowling the banks of the Styx. So all these conversations about ‘us’ and ‘them’, about borders and keeping those people out and these people in.

FINN Are you interested in Cerberus just because he’s a gatekeeper who occupies this liminal space, or is it also the threat of violence he represents?

MARK Absolutely, yes. I mean look what’s happening in Hong Kong. The threat of

violence is always hand-in-hand with this kind of gatekeeper mentality – they have to keep people out or in and it’s usually not by giving them a cupcake. So violence is something I believe naturally walks with my work, and always has, in a way.

FINN Why is that?

MARK Just look at history. History is violent. The history of slavery is violent. Violence always weaves in and out of my work, comfortably and uncomfortably.

FINN At the time of the Watts Riots you were very young, so I’m curious to know why you were drawn to it for this body of work and how you remember its impact on the city?

MARK The Watts Rebellion for me was about being a child and listening to other people recount their stories. Stories that I heard from my mother and her friends about how it started, how it spread, what happened – I was always fascinated, like, “Oh reaaally”. I grew up with people telling me their side of what happened, so I thought that would be an interesting place for me to start.

FINN I heard you talk about the 1992 Rodney King riots and you said something really interesting about how the city metamorphosed on a material level overnight. Plywood boards appeared on shop fronts, posters went up...

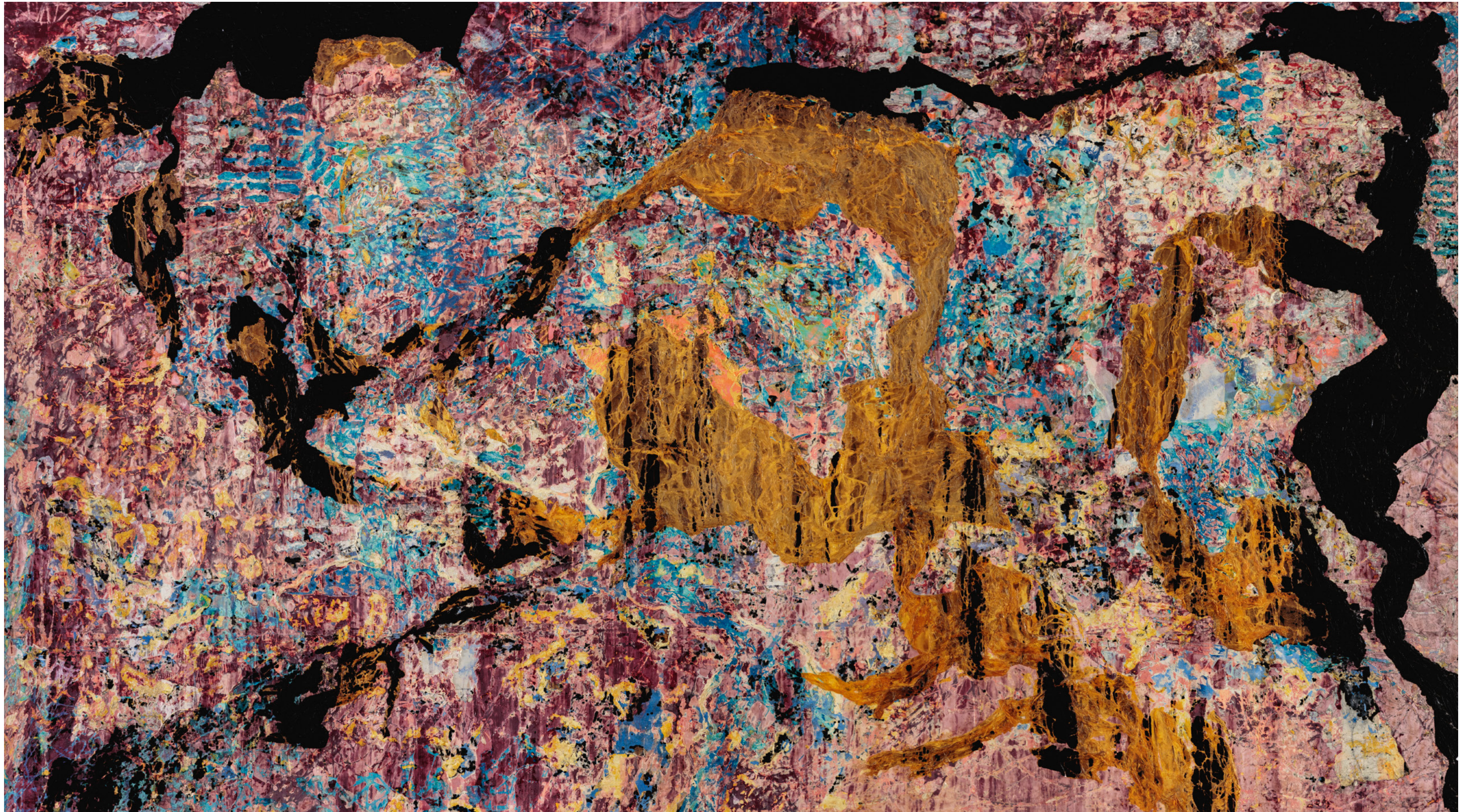
MARK I could not have been the artist I am today if it wasn’t for the 1992 riot. All of this advertising, all of this bill-boarding, all those lots that were burned down, that’s where my material 100 percent came from. That really happened because we saw it on tape. It was an early moment where videotape captured something that became part of the public conversation around police brutality.

FINN The materials generated from the ‘92 riots were ephemeral. Unlike the internet, those posters weren’t there forever, they were part of a cycle in which imagery and text were perpetually replaced.

MARK I’m still fascinated by that. Sometimes I’ll take down a poster and think, “I’ll take that other one next week,” and it’s just gone. In the 80s I was basically just bumming around Europe but I always used to be fascinated by the [news] kiosk, and how dense they would become with all the posters for bands and lodging. I see a little bit of it in London, but nothing like it was in the 80s. You’d walk into a club and it would be plastered with this band and that band – it’s all done on an app now. A different time... it has a different tactile feel.

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FINN There’s a stratigraphy to those layers, too. You can access certain periods through them, which is a texture you incorporate into your canvases, like an archaeologist.

MARK I always say that no matter where in the world my work is shown, as soon as people see this kind of urban archaeology, most people know what it is. I did a big sculpture at LAX [Bell Tower, Pan Am Terminal, 2014], a Jumbotron that’s just over the TSA [Transport Security Administration] and all it is, is plywood barricades from the city, pulled down and shaped into a Jumbotron. We understand this kind of global urbanisation, we know it in our psyche, it’s visibly invisible. I’ve always looked for details that point to something obvious in an urban landscape or a racial conversation, those micro details that point to a macro.

FINN That’s what I love about works like *Across 110th Street* [2008] or *Los Moscos* [2004], where you have this objectified, aerial view of the city that is somehow incorporated into an individual perspective through your use of found material.

MARK It’s funny, whenever my work is shown in any city – could be London – and I have a map painting that’s very much London, it’s amazing how many people will stand in front of it and try and find where they live. I find that so interesting. It’s almost like we want to locate ourselves, I think it grounds us in a space and in a time that kind of belongs to us.

FINN A work like *Sapphire Blue* [2019] evokes an aerial view of a city engulfed by rioting. Like a miasma spreading from the epicentre with a kind of fluidity.

MARK Yes, because that’s generally what happens. If you look at Hong Kong, and ask, “How did it start?” people will say, “Well we talked and then it went over here, and then it kind of went here and then...” I think unrest does move like water, in a way.

FINN There’s a violence and tension behind these works and the historical subject material that you’re approaching. Works like *Pickett’s Charge* [2017] too, which deal with extreme violence. Is there something about that underlying tension that you find particularly stimulating?

MARK Yes. Because extreme violence is going on, it’s going on in our cities, it’s going on in our schools, it’s going on everywhere. I always say that if you turn a light on abuse we have to be responsible for it. In the 70s, there was no language around bullying, I was just

beat up, that’s it. Slowly, slowly, slowly, as a community we started taking responsibility for it, a language developed around it, and support systems, too. It became not OK. As soon as we forget, it goes back in the dark and we don’t have to be responsible for it.

FINN You’re also showing a video work, *Dancing in the Street* [2019]. How do you see the dialogue between the live performance and the streets of south LA?

MARK I had the idea and I wanted to go to the more industrial part of town, not where people are living, but to factories and trucking depots – that’s where my studio is anyway. It’s almost like the projection was a sandpaper. My assistant ran it through something to make it look like film, so it’s almost like time’s collapsed, where you really feel like, ‘Oh this was shot in 1965,’ until you see the semi-truck, or the very contemporary urban graffiti. I like that collapsing of time, where I know it’s now but it’s not. You know what’s funny though? The one time I got stopped by the police. Ain’t that funny? Here I am leaning out of this van, dressed in white with this projector and he pulls up and says, “What are you doing?” And I was like, “Oh I just want to see how it looked on a building.” He just looked at me and was like, “None of this makes sense so I’m just going to drive by.” All this racial profiling did not make sense, to have this tall, skinny black man hanging out of a van with a projector.

FINN Speaking of gateways, *Dancing in the Street* was at this juncture of pop culture and protest music, but could it also be conceived as a gateway to mobilisation and action?

MARK Absolutely, it was. It was many gateways. It was about mobilisation, it was about us moving forward politically, all those

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women in my mother’s hair salon going to school through affirmative action. I would sit there as a child in the 70s, and at any one time there were four black women under the hairdryers with curlers in their hair, all of them with university books. And I would say, “Mum, what are they doing?” And she’d say, “They go to school Mark, everybody goes to school now.” So I grew up in what was started by that uprising. I became a child with a black entrepreneur mother who had a business.

FINN In bringing it back now is there a part of you that’s trying to recall a similar kind of thrust?

MARK Well I think that when times are hard you must mobilise, when times are hard you have to speak up. If the far right is breaking the playbook then why are we worried about the playbook? We can mobilise, we can influence history and we *are* influencing history. We’re living through seismic shifts but we can’t believe for one second that our voices don’t matter, you can’t.

FINN That’s a good segue to talk about your work outside the studio. How do you see not just Art + Practice [an LA-based arts and social services foundation] but Art for Justice Fund [an initiative aimed at reducing mass incarceration through art] as another gateway between studio and community?

MARK I didn’t really start university until I was 30 and I wasn’t out with a Masters until I was almost 40. Which means that I had navigated what you would call the mainstream for most of my life. The ups and downs, top 40 on the radio, what can I tell you? I started going to art school and you become part of the art world, which has a kind of contained space. I was like, “This is fine, I like this space, I like the ideas but I would also like to share some of this new information with a larger audience.” And then I started to think about what are we sharing with our young people as far as ‘contemporary art’ is concerned? What does it look like? What communities have access to contemporary ideas? So that’s really where it all came out of, it wasn’t a strategy, I was a person before I came to art school and there were things I agreed with and things I didn’t. I guess I wanted to have some equity at that table.

FINN It’s really interesting you had this extended period of real life, with no connection to art before going to art school.

MARK It was a real good dose of traditional value systems and where I fit in with that [laughs]. I got a good observation working in a

hair salon of traditional gender moulds and all that stuff.

FINN I had the pleasure of talking to Theaster Gates for our last Winter Annual, and along with people like Rick Lowe, you all revoke the idea of ‘the autonomous artist’. With Art + Practice you’re effectively saying, “Yes I’m the artist, but that doesn’t matter, this is bigger than me.” You facilitate collective action and community voice.

MARK Oh god yeah. People are like, “How come you don’t put your name on the building?”, I was like, “What, are you serious?” I do think it’s easier for me in a way – every time I walk out the studio I am reminded pretty much on a daily basis that I am a black man. No matter how hermetic I want to be in the art world, as soon as I step outside I’m aware of race. So it’s natural for me to say, “Oh OK, well these ideas still exist so to want to have conversations around them is fine because I’m aware of them every day.” I don’t have the luxury of disappearing, as soon as I leave that site, I’m a black man in Los Angeles. So I’m constantly aware of race and I’m constantly aware that the body I was born into is political, so how can I leave a community? That’s impossible. I’d have to leave my skin. I don’t even think about it, it just is what it is.

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