CRITICAL CONVERSATIONS

Event transcript featuring **Mark Bradford**

LIBERATING THE CULTURAL NARRATIVE THROUGH ARTISTIC EXPRESSION

March 10, 2022

criticalconversations.com

CRITICAL CONVERSATIONS

Event hosted by **New Roads School**

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Critical Conversations Speaker Series
Featuring Mark Bradford

TRANSCRIPT

Guest
Mark Bradford

Moderator
Luthern Williams
Head of School
New Roads School

Moderator
Mario Johonson
Director of Student Wellness and Human Development
New Roads School

MARIO JOHONSON:

Good evening, friends. Welcome to the Critical Conversations Speaker Series. My name is Mario Johonson. I will serve as this evening's event moderator. I'd like to welcome our esteemed featured guests, Mr. Mark Bradford, New Roads head of school, Luthern Williams, our local and national partner schools, the Cotton On Foundation, and New Roads Spanish language, culture, and literature instructor and Critical Conversations' interpreter, Carmen Anders. We're also pleased to welcome graphic recorder, Jessamy Gee, from Think in Colour Australia, who's here to help capture our thinking. Jessamy will be creating a live visual representation of the output from our session today that will be made available to our partners.

Mark Bradford is an internationally renowned contemporary artist born and based in Los Angeles. He is perhaps best known for his utilization of found materials in abstract collage works that are indicative of the contexts he perceptively observes and lives within. He was raised by a single mother in the West Adams neighborhood of South Los Angeles and went on to work as a hairdresser at his mom's Leimert Park hair salon. It was in that hair salon that Mark Bradford began repurposing discarded materials for his art.

In 2021, he was recognized as one of the 100 most influential people by TIME magazine. He's a recipient of the MacArthur Genius Grant, has represented the United States at the Venice Biennale along with countless other professional accolades far too much to mention in this small space that we have this evening. Bradford's practice has resonated around the globe resulting in recognition outside the United States and inclusion in many internationally renowned collections.

Alongside his work in paintings and collage, Bradford has also explored issues of race, class, and gender in video, photography, sculpture, and installation. Through abstract art, Mark has disrupted, transcended, and critiqued the

limitations of the traditional American narrative about marginalized communities, offering more complex social and political commentary from his inimitable vantage point. He is purposeful in how he dissects social phenomena such as racism, homophobia, sexism, and poverty and the systemic inequities that perpetuate them. In his community activism, he also seeks to liberate the potential of underserved communities by developing innovative programs to support foster youth and by bringing art to galleries in underserved communities.

It is our esteemed pleasure to welcome artist, Mark Bradford, as our guest this evening. In recognition of the time limitation, I'm going to jump right into the heart of things. This conversation will be centered around four segments: the personal, the educational, the aesthetic, and the cultural. When it's time to transition to another segment, I will deliver a gentle tap of this chime. Luther, you better listen to my taps this evening.

MARK BRADFORD:

Okay, he was like, ding.

LUTHERN WILLIAMS:

I always do, Mario.

MARK BRADFORD:

Look at Mario. Okay, Capricorn, organize.

MARIO JOHONSON:

Let us begin with the first segment. Mark, for those unfamiliar-

MARK BRADFORD:

Mario.

MARIO JOHONSON:

... with your personal history, you grew up in the heavily black Crenshaw District of the 1970s and '80s where you often worked as a hairstylist in your mom's beauty shop. How does the intersection of working-class life, familial entrepreneurship, and a culturally defining aesthetic practice such as black hairstyling inform your evolution as an artist?

MARK BRADFORD:

Whoo. Okay, all right. Well, actually the first part, being working class, I think that kind of formed my thinking. Working class people were like, if you went to college, you'd better study something that you can make some money at, so that thrust from trying to go from working class to middle class to upper middle class to whatever, that was really the only thing I had in my thinking.

Now, since that was not open to me, I did not educationally go that way at all. What my thinking was, hmm... It was just creative, to be honest with you. I was working in a mom and pop salon. It wasn't what I would call upwardly mobile or downwardly spiral. It just kind of treaded water. You used all your facilities. "Mark, be creative. Style the wig. Mark, paint, what do you call it, the prices on the wall." So creativity was readily available, but I never thought that the creativity could lead anywhere. It led me to the nightclubs, and we would dress up in outfits. I used my creativity in the clubs, but I never thought that that would lead to that. It just wasn't. So for me, creativity is an old friend. Something that's always been around. It's like people who are real smart and their brain got them through universities and moved them on. It was about creativity's like an old friend.

LUTHERN WILLIAMS:

Well, it's interesting, Mark, because one of the things when I like to think about African American culture, I often think of it as the art of creating something from nothing-

MARK BRADFORD:

Yeah, [crosstalk 00:05:55].

LUTHERN WILLIAMS:

... or creating something from seeming nothing. One of the things that fascinates me about you is that part of your inspiration started with ends paper. Could you talk a little bit about how something that is found in a salon and that you wouldn't necessarily think is material in a traditional sense for art became art for you?

MARK BRADFORD:

Well, I went to school much later. By the time I graduated university, I had a whole lot of life under my belt. So when I started being an artist, I really could not leave all the stories behind and just move forward with something that had nothing to do with my past. But at the same time, how am I going to give myself room to play in regards to race, gender, sexuality, class because they can strangle creativity? You can almost end up being a spokesman for all of those things that I just mentioned instead of play. How can I find a way to play? So I was looking for those little details, those little things that pointed to something but didn't have this huge mouthpiece for it.

When I got out of school, there were two things. Got out of school, I was broke. I've been broke many times, so that wasn't new. I owed a lot of money. That wasn't new. I had a little studio that was inexpensive, and I worked at the hair salon. So that context was not that unusual for me. But I wanted a studio practice, and I didn't have money, and I wanted to point to things. End papers were about 50 cents a box, and I could play enough in this space. What I mean by that is I could waste the material at 50 cents a box because you got to waste the material to go where you're going. If I bought a tube of oil paint that was $100, I'd feel a little more tight.

So I found a material that I could play with. Then I kind of liked it because it pointed to something. It pointed to merchant culture, black merchant culture of the '70s and '80s and '90s which I grew up in. It was matriarchal, and it had to do with these spaces of adornment. I really liked that. I really liked that space. I was always a fly on the wall. I knew it wasn't particularly the stories coming out of the space, my stories, but I did like listening to the stories.

You put all that together, and that's kind of my entrance into being an abstract painter. But at the same time, is it really possible for me in this black body to ever be abstract? Because this body is always so figurative. This body has this huge history around it that's constantly being talked about. So the proposition was, are we allowed to abstract our narratives? Are we allowed to pull them apart? Are we allowed to remix them? I kind of gave myself permission to do that. In the Hollywood narrative, we think we know what South Central looks like through the music culture and through movies, but I thought the proposition was, is it possible that we can find other narratives within that South Central huge Hollywood narrative? Are there smaller stories?

LUTHERN WILLIAMS:

That's a great place to transition to the next question around this piece. The Los Angeles that you grew up in, Mark, looks very different from today. What impact has the shifting racial and culture demographics of the city had on you as a black Los Angeles-based artist?

MARK BRADFORD:

Well, Los Angeles for me when I was working in the hair salon, the area that I worked in was predominantly black. It has shifted to be predominantly Hispanic which has changed the visual culture. The sign painting, really they brought that, and you see a lot more sign painting. They have a very different relationship to public space. When I was growing up people would use the car. They would sell dinners out of the car. They would sell clothes out of the car. But now it's very different where public space is used in a very different way than when I was growing up.

If you really believe that the things are constantly moving no matter how slow, then you just look and go, "Well, I would say the Hood is moody." It's always changing. Everything is always moving. Then one day you just look at and, oh, this shift has happened, but it just changes slowly. I think that the city just embraces it in a way, and you don't even know it's changed.

LUTHERN WILLIAMS:

Well, Mark, I'm interested in what gave you the audacity to feel that you could question and interrogate the official Hollywood story or the historical narrative as it's told.

MARK BRADFORD:

Well, you know what? Yeah, shit, because I felt like I had a place in it, too. I really felt like that narrative was very, very about stereotypes and really making everything very, how can I say, very one plus one always equals two. I really felt like there was this creepingness of violence moving in to certain types of bodies, moving through those same spaces, in effect, women, gay men. So I would hear that creeping into the narratives that you would see in the movies and the language and I was thinking, "Now, wait a minute now. Wait a minute. I have as much right as everybody else to walk down these same streets." So this idea that if you're not invited to the party, you bring a folding chair so that you can kind of ease your way into that table as well. So it really had to do with me saying, "Look, there's a lot more voices in this community than just the ones that are making music or the ones that are making the movies." They're much more fluid. They're a hybrid. They're intersexual, intergenerational.

It's what you see on the merchant posters, what you see. Your eye never would look and train yourself to see these merchant posters: "We buy..." The first merchant poster I remember was about hair. Then they kind of moved into merchant... bed bugs, and "We buy houses," etc., etc., etc. So I'm always looking for these smaller voices that navigate the same way. I think that that probably was my impetus. Like, let's expand what we know about, quote, unquote, all black anything. I think that that plurality from within is something that I'm very interested in. Just because you put a whole bunch of black folks in a room doesn't mean that we're all the same. Please let us have the same plurality as anybody else.

LUTHERN WILLIAMS:

What do you think that narrative does, Mark?

MARIO JOHONSON:

One second, Luthern. I'm just going to transition you on the other side and you can pick up.

MARK BRADFORD:

It's the bell, Luthern. You got to watch that bell.

MARIO JOHONSON:

You got to watch my bell.

LUTHERN WILLIAMS:

You know what? He's always ringing that bell on me. I don't even know. I think it's arbitrary, to tell you the truth.

MARK BRADFORD:

[crosstalk 00:14:19].

MARIO JOHONSON:

I promise it's not arbitrary. We're moving on to the education segment. So Mark-

MARK BRADFORD:

We're moving on to... okay.

MARIO JOHONSON:

Education segment. As an educational institution, New Roads believes that creativity is innate in all of us as human beings.

MARK BRADFORD:

Is that right?

MARIO JOHONSON:

In the meantime, we also believe that formal education provides a focus and structure process through which creative individuals learn to give greater significance, meaning, and depth to your art production. Can you talk about the role and impact that formal education played in your evolution as an individual and an artist?

MARK BRADFORD:

Not a whole lot when I was growing up, let's just say that. I was one of those people that fell through the cracks. By the time I was in the eighth grade, no, I was not one of those people that was defined as artistic. No, I was not one of those people that was good in math, English, or sports. I was one of those people that... I just got pushed to the back, of my own volition, too. I was not overly smart. I was a smart... What I'm saying, I was a reader, but that was in my private life. I would go home and read a lot, but I was not a good student at all.

I think I probably struggled under the idea of... If you start hearing the word "sissy" when you're about in, I don't know, third grade, by the time you get to about eighth grade... I mean I'm not James Baldwin. I didn't have this brain

that was going to send me through education. So I guess I felt, well, sissies turn into gays and gays go to nightclubs, so I just kind of went that way at about 14. So I really stopped going to school really. I did graduate high school. I went to a continuation high school where they just, "Good luck." They give you a bus pass and said, "Good luck. Hope you make it through."

MARIO JOHONSON:

What role do you think art can and should play in education then?

MARK BRADFORD:

I don't know because New Roads has a very different narrative than a public school would have a different narrative. This is what I can say about art. Let's not talk about art as... The conversation around art is a very middle-class conversation. "Oh, I'm going to go to school and be an artist." That's a very middle class conversation. But creativity is alive and well. I think no matter what class you're from, if young people have a phone, they really are using their creativity. We may not like... We may say, "Oh, it's just on Instagram, or it's just on TikTok." But they're editing. They're creating their own narratives. They're understanding their image. They are curating their own content. All over the world you see this. So what's interesting is is that creativity is alive. Now, how we harness that into art, that's another conversation. Sometimes art can kill creativity. So it's a balance. It's a balance of allowing the creativity to drive the conversation into possibly art, becoming an artist or becoming a doctor with it or becoming a lawyer with it or becoming a politician with it. I don't-

LUTHERN WILLIAMS:

Mark, you talked about the sissy piece. It seems to me-

MARK BRADFORD:

I never said the word sissy. I don't where you got that from.

LUTHERN WILLIAMS:

You didn't say it? Well-

MARK BRADFORD:

I don't know what you heard about me.

LUTHERN WILLIAMS:

This whole dominant culture narrative about marginalized people, do you think that these narratives do violence on people's sense of who they are and who they can be?

MARK BRADFORD:

Well, yes, I think if you accept them. To be honest with you, I don't know if I necessarily accepted that I was a sissy, but I did accept that people were putting that on me, and I did accept that physically to my body if I was not careful that I could possibly have violence toward my body. That's as far as I took it. I had to navigate the streets and navigate the schoolyard, as women do as well, and I just understood that there was physical danger connected to those type of language putting on people. Yes, I think that we must never forget the violence. We must never forget the violence. The language is one thing, but the violence is completely another. Of course, they do harm. Because if you are speaking up and you believe something, you should have the right to have the same sound box, you should be able to stand on your sound box and not think that the violence will happen to your body if you are in disagreement with someone else's ideology. Does that make sense?

LUTHERN WILLIAMS:

Yeah, it makes perfect sense. It's interesting that-

MARK BRADFORD:

It doesn't always happen, but it should not be that the loudest person in the room is one that we all tremble. If we have a difference of opinion, we should be able to stand and say, "Well, I don't agree with that."

LUTHERN WILLIAMS:

Did school teach you how to interrogate the official story-

MARK BRADFORD:

No.

LUTHERN WILLIAMS:

... and the narrative in the way that you do in your paintings, I mean, in your art, excuse me, not your paintings, your art?

MARK BRADFORD:

Did school teach me that?

LUTHERN WILLIAMS:

Yes.

MARK BRADFORD:

No, I don't think school taught me that. School gave me the mechanics. School gave me the literary and conceptual histories that had gone on that I hadn't any experience. School gave me structure. School challenged me in a way that, for me, it was unusual. School was a learning think tank for me. I don't know where I came... I don't know if I ever wanted to interrogate anything, but I definitely did not want to... I just had a voice. I was just going to do what I was going to do. That's really what it came down to.

LUTHERN WILLIAMS:

What was happening-

MARK BRADFORD:

[crosstalk 00:21:25]. I was going to do what I was going to do.

LUTHERN WILLIAMS:

But, Mark, what happens to those folks who may grow up like you but don't find their voice? [crosstalk 00:21:34].

MARK BRADFORD:

I hope that they do. I hope that they do.

LUTHERN WILLIAMS:

What do you think can happen if you don't have a voice?

MARK BRADFORD:

What you can do is you can go to supposedly your support system, whether it's school, your family. If people are trying to silence who you are, you need to very clearly tell them. Make other people complicit in the fact that they are

not giving you your space. Everyone has the right. It's not something that you should ask for. I never wait for other people to say I had value. If I was going to wait on that, I'd be waiting till 100 years from now. But I felt that I had value. Maybe nobody else ever thought I had value. Some people say black people have no value, gay people have no value, but I felt I had value. Intrinsically, if you have value, you tell yourself you have value, and then you make the room complicit in the fact that they're not treating you the way that they should treat you.

LUTHERN WILLIAMS:

But everybody doesn't seem to be as strong as you, Mark.

MARK BRADFORD:

I'm not strong, though. But I'm not strong. I've never been strong per se.

LUTHERN WILLIAMS:

Then what do you think allowed you to challenge what people were saying about you?

MARK BRADFORD:

You know what, Luthern? They've been saying it so long, I think after a while I just forgot about it. At a point, just put Mister in front of it.

MARIO JOHONSON:

I'm going to transition from there to the aesthetic segment. This segment is focused on the power of abstraction which we've already ventured into. Mark, can you speak to why you elect to utilize abstraction as a primary medium of your artistic practice, and what the aesthetic and/or philosophical significance of producing, quote, paintings that don't utilize paint is for you?

MARK BRADFORD:

Yes, well, twofold. I felt like there was a hierarchy in aesthetics, painting being at the top and then it would trend down. Well, also there was not a lot in the canon of abstract black men painters. If there were abstract painters, they were from the New York school, macho white guys, Jackson Pollock. They call them the Cowboys. I just thought, oh, wouldn't that be interesting if I just moseyed my little narrow ass over there and said, "Oh, I'm going to sit at this table"? Of course, you get the immediate, "No, no, you're not sitting at this table." I said, "Yeah, yeah, yeah, I'm sitting at this table."

Also twofold, one, I wanted to unpack that, and I wanted to expand that. Also I wanted to say that narratives are not static, and they're not revisionist. They're messy, they're complicated, and they're uncomfortable. So black and abstraction were two things that should not fit together. They fit together for me because I needed to create a space that I could play in, that I could make mistakes in, that I could be nervous in. I disappointed a lot of early on in saying, "Oh, I really wish..." Is that black art? I'd say, "Well, I'm black, and that's the art, so it's black art." But I demand, once again, this idea that we are multiple voices, multiple, multiple, multiple, multiple, just like every other group. There is no one way. So abstraction was my way in to have this conversation.

LUTHERN WILLIAMS:

Mark, I want to bring this back to education because I do think that what you've done is incredibly powerful in the sense that you have demanded a space for yourself where you have a certain degree of liberation and you can affirm your own humanity.

MARK BRADFORD:

Well, look, now I'm going to be honest. You have to understand something. I was a hairdresser, and I worked in a hair salon. I was always the one curling the hair for the debutantes, but I wasn't invited to the debutantes. I kind of went the back door. So this idea that... I was not the best student. I did go to school [inaudible 00:26:53]. What I'm saying is is that, yes, all of this story, I hope by being vulnerable and telling the real story, it can help students. I'm not the student that gets the perfect grades and gets an SAT and goes through. But there should be space for the student who takes detours. I took a little bit of a detour. When you take detours, there's still the possibility that you can move towards more your dreams. It's a different journey, and sometimes the road can be a little bit... Sometimes, did they have kids? Sometimes people have criminal records. Sometimes people have done all kinds of things that, quote, unquote, could get in the way. School taught me perseverance. It really did. It did teach me perseverance.

LUTHERN WILLIAMS:

I'll just say the contrast, Mark, because I grew up and school was fine. The fact of the matter is that I did well. But where I found school difficult was that the dominant culture of the private school where I went basically it always suggested to me that I didn't belong there and that I was less than, and I always had to prove myself over and over again. I didn't achieve the kind of freedom that it seems that you achieved with yourself until much later on in terms of really feeling like I could assert my humanity in the same way, that I could take off my mask and take off my armor and just do me in whatever that meant.

MARK BRADFORD:

You know what, Luthern? You probably blended in a little bit more than me. There was no blending. When you're six foot eight and you don't play basketball by the time you're 14, the disappointment in everybody's... The battles over

my... The disappointment I didn't play basketball and the disappointment I really wasn't interested in voguing either. So I was constantly having people disappointed. I think that I had to so early not be bothered with it because I knew right around the corner, "Hey, hey, do you play basketball?" "No, I don't." "Oh, man, shit." I guess I got a thick skin very, very early because people are constantly talking about, "If I were you, if I were you... or what I would have done." I'm six foot eight, but I should have been 200... I'm six foot eight and 100 pounds. Go figure. I look like an alien. I'm an alien. You know those alien movies.

MARIO JOHONSON:

Mark, can you talk about you as Professor [crosstalk 00:30:18]-

LUTHERN WILLIAMS:

Where's the chime, Mario?

MARIO JOHONSON:

It's not-

MARK BRADFORD:

We're [crosstalk 00:30:20].

MARIO JOHONSON:

This is still within the aesthetics segment. Mark, can you talk about how you, as Professor Loretta J. Ross would say, call viewers into a visceral experience of the history of the cartographical landscapes you select? This question has to do with your utilization of maps and mapping as a foundational feature of your art production.

MARK BRADFORD:

That's true. In some ways, I almost see it as counter-mapping. That was a term that was very interesting. You had groups counter-mapping. People would map it, and then people would counter-map, say, well, actually, this is another narrative on top of it. Maps are the most honest and dishonest thing you're ever going to see. They're full of lies, and they're full of colonialism, and they have these long, long histories. But also at the same time they can be these interesting abstract grids. So I always thought that maps are about really power. They're really about who owns it. You can take, let me see, a month ago and understanding Russia and understanding Ukraine. Now, two months from now, that map may change. The map may change.

I've always been interested in maps, and I've always been interested in power and the way in which civilization and people migrate because of wars, because of trying to do better, all these things. I always like to start from something, start from the social and then try to push it into abstraction. I don't know if my paintings, quote, unquote... They're paintings because I say they're paintings, and they're paintings because I have a conversation with the history of abstract painting. Once again, it was a very white, male, heterosexual dominated space. I just thought it'd be interesting to unpack it a little bit. I don't go looking for trouble, but, you know, the trouble's there. We can dance.

LUTHERN WILLIAMS:

I don't know about that, Mark.

MARK BRADFORD:

[crosstalk 00:32:40]. What I was going to say about... I do kind of feel like... Luthern, I'm going to tell you, to be honest with you, it's not for you to feel like you don't belong in a room. It's for the room to adjust to you. You just need to be you. I've been in many rooms, I've been in many rooms... Well, I probably could get a little bit of vibe that I wasn't welcome, but if I was in that room, if I decided to be in that room, that's the room's problem. That's the room's [crosstalk 00:33:09].

LUTHERN WILLIAMS:

Mark, the thing is, because tonight you have this audience of a lot of educators-

MARK BRADFORD:

[crosstalk 00:33:15].

LUTHERN WILLIAMS:

... both public and private, school educators. The children who are not interrogating these narratives in the same way and these narratives are having an impact on how they see themselves and their possibilities.

MARK BRADFORD:

I do understand it. [crosstalk 00:33:30].

LUTHERN WILLIAMS:

What would you say to the educators?

MARK BRADFORD:

What I would say is that the most sensitive voices are never going to be the biggest in the room, but that doesn't mean that every single thing that I'm telling you now I probably had in me when I was six. It takes a little bit longer for sensitive people to unpack it, which doesn't mean that we're not as valuable as anybody else.

What I would say is that you have to listen with a different ear. That's it. Everybody doesn't have the same ear. Everybody is not going to articulate the same way. Everybody's not going to be able to use language in the same way. Some of it you are going to miss. You have to listen with a different ear. You will find that the more creative ones are the most quiet, are the most quiet. Look, they're savvy. Look, they can pick up on the language really fast. I think that you got to find out... You got to do more listening than talking, and you got to create a safe space, and I mean a real safe space, not like a safe space and as soon as you walk out the room they judge you for being on TikTok all night. I'm talking about a real safe space. They don't want to hear the judgments of everything that they hold dear to them because that's going to close the door. I'm not saying that we roll that way, but you got to allow them to use the tools that they feel safe with and find a way to create some type of communication because young people...

Listen, judgment, they can hear it before it's out of your mouth. They can hear it in your eyes. They can see it in the way that you hand them back their phone. They're intuitive. They're empaths. They're always going into spaces that they know are not going to welcome them. So they're keyed up. They're really keyed up. I think the older generations, I think that sometimes we do too much interrogating of the tools of the ways in which they build themselves. You got to build a relationship before you build trust. That's just bottom line. You can talky, talky, talky, talky, talk. Them kids know more than you know. They know more than you think. I don't assume that they don't know. They have a lot of tools at their... It's almost like they all have the possibility to drive Ferraris because of the internet, but learning how to drive a car is a different thing. It's funny. I've never been an educator. I sometimes do teach when I do artist's talk, but I've never been an educator. But I do know that you have to find a space that's less judgey.

LUTHERN WILLIAMS:

Does a race matter in building that relationship and trust?

MARK BRADFORD:

Race, everything. Look, they're clocking everything. They're clocking your race, your class. They already know before you walk in, "Oh, he's gay. Oh, he's trans. That one's biracial." They're clocking like that. They're doing all this before you even say hello. They've clocked your shoes. They've clocked your glasses. All of it matters. All of it goes into the equation. I-

MARIO JOHONSON:

That's an [crosstalk 00:37:03] response. I was with ninth graders today. I got a direct experience of a lot of what you're saying, Mark.

MARK BRADFORD:

They clock you. I mean, please. Yeah, they're going to clock your glasses. [crosstalk 00:37:13]-

MARIO JOHONSON:

[crosstalk 00:37:13].

MARK BRADFORD:

... shoes or cute or not cute. It's just the way in which through their material landscape they're developing who they are. So really all of it does matter you know. It really does, and you really have to allow them that landscape. They are articulating [crosstalk 00:37:33].

MARIO JOHONSON:

It's a great point to transition to our last segment, the cultural impact segment. Political commentator and previous Critical Conversations' guest, Van Jones, maintained that one of the great sources of our current social disunity is the breakdown of America's cultural narrative, which Luthern has brought up, and you all have ventured again in this space already, which is historically rooted in white supremacy, patriarchy, and widespread economic inequality. In light of Van Jones's insight on culture, in what ways do you, as a black artist, liberate the representation of blackness in an effort to foster a new American cultural narrative? Can you talk about the specific role of abstract art in liberating the representation of historically marginalized identity?

MARK BRADFORD:

Whew, Mario.

LUTHERN WILLIAMS:

A mouthful, right?

MARK BRADFORD:

Where's the drink? I don't have to liberate anything. It just has to be mine. I don't have to liberate blackness to move it forward. I don't ever see blackness as being static in my practice. I just don't see it as being static. So me, as an artist, it encompasses all of that. Abstraction, it's just demanding a space of hybridity. That's what early, early rap did. They sampled. They took a little bit of this and a little bit of that and scratched that and they moved it around, and they made a whole nother discourse. It wasn't just soul. It wasn't just anything. It was layered.

All I'm really trying to do is just create this kind of hybrid, abstract space in which my ideas can manifest. I'm okay with the word "black." See, I don't have a problem. They can say black. You can be blackity, black, whatever it means. It's fine with me. I don't have a problem with that. I don't have a problem with the black. I have a problem with the easy equations of what some people say black is. I don't have a problem with the space. I feel like the space of blackness is Afro-futurism. It's like looking out into the stars. It's infinite. You mean to tell me the folks from the slave cabins to today, if you stretch that, do you know how infinite that is? You know how infinite that is? So don't tell me 100 years from now it's not going to stretch even farther.

LUTHERN WILLIAMS:

Well, but what you're saying, and it's interesting if we go back to this word of liberation, it's what that dominant narrative tells you about yourself and what you believe in.

MARK BRADFORD:

Who are they? Who are they?

LUTHERN WILLIAMS:

That's what I'm saying. You were saying, "Who are they?" Not everybody questions the narrative in the same way.

MARK BRADFORD:

More and more, though, more and more. Every generation... more and more. You see young people questioning it a lot more. You see lots of dominant narratives being just sliced down. When I was growing up, if a boy painted his nails a color, you knew, boom, gay. A lot of things are being questioned. Will it take time? Yes. But no one should speak for any group of people. Mm-mm (negative), absolutely not. I don't think that's... What is that? You see, we are living in abstraction. You'll have Mario do a TikTok, and Mario will have his bell. That audio, someone will pick that up and lay that audio over his content. Then that person will pick it up and then that person. So I've looked at content a thousand removed from the originator. That is abstraction. Yes, it may have a relationship to the originator, but it is moving and pushing it into another space. That is it. That's abstraction.

MARIO JOHONSON:

That's brilliant. That's brilliant. I really want to jump into my next question because it goes right into [crosstalk 00:42:14].

LUTHERN WILLIAMS:

Where's the chime?

MARIO JOHONSON:

This is still the same segment.

MARK BRADFORD:

[crosstalk 00:42:17] I'm on TikTok, Mario.

MARIO JOHONSON:

It's still the same segment, gentlemen. Mark, how do you engage the rapidly shifting cultural customs that directly issue from the impacts of new technology and its attendant forms of expression? How [crosstalk 00:42:30]?

MARK BRADFORD:

[crosstalk 00:42:30], is that what you mean? I mean I'm an artist, so I just do what I do, but if something's interesting to me, oh, I'm going to look at it because I find it interesting. I find TikTok interesting, so, yes, I go on TikTok. Anything that I find interesting... Years and years ago I was really interested in what was coming out of Korea. I'm really interested in movies coming out of Nigeria, these Christian-based Nigerian cinema. They didn't call it Bollywood. There was another name for it. I'm just curious, so wherever my curiosity takes me, I go. I go. It's not a linear. Don't ever try to connect the dots with me, Luthern, you never will.

LUTHERN WILLIAMS:

[crosstalk 00:43:15], so you already know me.

MARK BRADFORD:

How does all that go together?

LUTHERN WILLIAMS:

You know that's exactly where my mind is always going but what I [crosstalk 00:43:25].

MARK BRADFORD:

It goes together because I say it goes together.

LUTHERN WILLIAMS:

One of the things I will say, Mark, is part of what I consider to be the thing in your art that I really just am blown away by is the notion that it is called abstraction, but at the same time it's visceral. I respond to it both with my head and my heart because it feels to me the cartography is a body and that you are not allowing us to look away as if it's abstraction.

MARK BRADFORD:

That's true.

LUTHERN WILLIAMS:

This is really visceral, and there are real things happening down where this cartography is, but it's not just an abstraction.

MARK BRADFORD:

It's social abstraction. It will never fully ever be abstraction, and it will never fully belong to where it came from. It'll get lost in the middle somewhere, but enough of the horror of whatever I'm talking about will cling to it. You will never have clean eyes just to look. It will never be Jackson Pollock because I'm-

LUTHERN WILLIAMS:

How do we support freedom of expression? Because in many ways I feel that's in part what you're talking about is the ability to freely express yourself in whatever form that happens to take.

MARK BRADFORD:

Well, I don't know. I don't know. Education is such a different thing, but I think that you do it in a very focused way. You get behind causes and organizations that you really feel strongly are doing the work.

MARIO JOHONSON:

Mark, intergenerationally, what are some of the ways that we, as elders, can encourage our youth to connect more authentically to their innate creative instincts?

MARK BRADFORD:

Well, you said the wrong word, Mario. You don't want to say authentic because implying that it's not authentic. Y'all, just listen. Here's the thing. They will figure it out. I know you don't think they're going to figure it out, but they're going to figure it out. Every generation has always thought the next generation was going to hell in a hand basket. Really?

They will use the tools of their generation to articulate their lives. We may not be as comfortable. Me and Mario, we will text for about 10 minutes, and then we'll pick up the phone and talk because that's what we do. We spend an hour on the phone talking. Younger generations, they can spend hours texting. They will use the tools of their generation to articulate their life, and we just have to have faith. It really is a leap of faith. You just got to have faith. Now, that's the one thing I've always had to have. I lived through the AIDS crisis. When I was 18 years old everybody around me started dying, dying, dying. Everybody just started dying. There was no cures and no optimism. I had to have faith that it was going to be all right, maybe not tomorrow, maybe next week, but it was going to be all right. So this idea of a nondenominational faith, I've always kind of had.

MARIO JOHONSON:

What are some reflections that you can share around artistic expression-

MARK BRADFORD:

Diana Ross's Reflections, that was an amazing [crosstalk 00:47:19].

MARIO JOHONSON:

[crosstalk 00:47:22].

MARK BRADFORD:

Nobody's going to know that reference on here.

MARIO JOHONSON:

Some reflections that you can share around artistic expression as a dimension of both social justice and personal well being.

MARK BRADFORD:

Social justice? You know what? I really think that if you feel drawn to a cause, it's never too early to start, and it's never too early to say that you support something. It's never too early to start, and it's never too small. It doesn't matter if anybody's looking, and it doesn't matter if it's not the cause that everybody's looking at. I think that everybody inherently has the need or the want to want to share in something. It can just be a group chat, but that there is something. So I think that, for me, at this time in my life, whatever I feel strongly about are the things that I work with. It comes from, I guess, passion. I don't know. It just comes from inside.

MARIO JOHONSON:

Wonderful. I'm going to turn our last question over to our head of school, Luthern Williams.

LUTHERN WILLIAMS:

Well, it's interesting.

MARK BRADFORD:

Make it good, Luthern.

LUTHERN WILLIAMS:

This has been a journey.

MARK BRADFORD:

Wait, it's been kind of an abstract talk.

LUTHERN WILLIAMS:

It's been an abstract journey with some touches of reality.

MARK BRADFORD:

You know what? You know what? You know what? The only thing that I try to do is I always try to be present. If it's a talk that my brother hooked me into, I just try to be present. Now when I am present, it's never going to be seamless. I'm never going to have all the right answers. I might stumble and bumble a little bit. But I try to always be present, and I try to always speak out of the truth that I feel right now. That is one thing I try to do. So we're doing this, and I just try to speak out of how I feel right now.

LUTHERN WILLIAMS:

Well, you've brought me on a journey because what I have heard from you, and I almost want to make sure I got it right on some levels, is that we should support the empowerment and expression of these young people. How we do that is crucial to all the rest. Is [crosstalk 00:50:03]?

MARK BRADFORD:

We're going to do it anyways, so you might as well get behind it.

LUTHERN WILLIAMS:

They're going to do it with or without us, is that [crosstalk 00:50:10]?

MARK BRADFORD:

Listen, either you teach to lie or you teach them to be open in a safe space where they can tell you what's going on. That's really what it comes down to. I would much rather have people in a safe space than just going behind your back and doing what they feel strongly about anyway. It's not about being perfect actually. It's about connecting through your vulnerabilities and the "I don't know" more than the "I know."

MARIO JOHONSON:

What a great place to close. Thank you so much, Mark Bradford and Luthern Williams. This has been an incredibly informative, meaning, and engaging discussion. Tonight's guest will receive an email invitation to join us for a reflective dialogue and deeper discussion as we transition from theory to meaningful engaged action. A final point, if you are connected with the private or public school community that would like to partner and join with us, then please reach out via our website, criticalconversations.com. Thank you so much for joining us this evening and good night. Have a wonderful evening. Thank you again so much, Mark Bradford, Luthern Williams-

MARK BRADFORD:

Nice to meet you.

MARIO JOHONSON:

... [crosstalk 00:51:24]. I thank [crosstalk 00:51:24].

LUTHERN WILLIAMS:

Nice to meet you, Mark. I can't wait to meet you in person.

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