

Kambui Olujimi

BLOUINARTINFO

A Conversation on Race, Police Brutality, and Art with Mark Bradford

BY MODERN PAINTERS, KAMBUI OLUJIMI | MAY 30, 2015

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(Left to right) Mark Bradford and Kambui Olujimi
(David McNew/AFP/Getty Images/ Courtesy Kambui Olujimi)

Over the last year the nation has witnessed numerous indelible cases of police violence against its African-American citizens. In Ferguson, Missouri, officer Darren Wilson shot and killed unarmed teenager Michael Brown. In Detroit, Michigan, the police killed seven-year-old Aiyana Jones in her sleep. Officers mistakenly raided her home while taping a reality show about “real world” homicides. And in my hometown of New York City, officer Daniel Pantaleo was videotaped choking Eric Garner to death for allegedly selling loose cigarettes. A New York City grand jury elected not to indict Pantaleo, thus clearing him of any criminal charges. The next day was the vernissage for Art Basel Miami Beach.

As a New Yorker, an artist, and a black man, I grappled with these events emotionally, psychologically, and spiritually. Questions stirred in me: How does this affect the way I navigate my city? How do these conditions influence what I'm making or what I think I "should" make? What impact does this climate have on me as an artist, and is it even discernible? These interior questions led to one-on-one conversations with colleagues, which led to a desire to explore these ideas in greater depth and to share them with a wider audience. As a result, I began a series of conversations with African-American artists for *Modern Painters*, starting here with Mark Bradford.

Kambui Olujimi: Where did you grow up?

Mark Bradford: I grew up in Santa Monica and Los Angeles.

KO: What sort of relationship did you have with the police when you were growing up?

MB: As a kid in the '70s, I was in Santa Monica, an all-white suburb on the coast, so none. Then I moved back to Los Angeles after grad school, to Inglewood, which is very urban, mainly black and Hispanic, and there I saw the presence of police a lot, and I realized they weren't there to protect: They were there to enforce the law. It was a very different relationship.

KO: What was Santa Monica like then?

MB: The police were always there to serve. They were background. They were just kind of there to observe, more like the police in London, much more like a bobby. It didn't feel like they were state troopers.

KO: So how did that affect your interaction with the police and your use of police services growing up? Because they provide a service.

MB: In Inglewood, they were not there to help you. They were there to *impose* the law on you.

That's how it feels in Inglewood, that's how it feels in South Central. It doesn't feel like they're there for you if you have an emergency. It's a very different feeling.

KO: And so you did navigate these spaces differently?

MB: Well, I felt nervous in the hood and relaxed on the West Side, in Santa Monica. As a grown man, I put it to you like this: If I'm on the West Side and I'm looking for an address, I don't slow down, I don't go up to houses that I don't know; it's very racialized and segregated here. But it's different now than when I was a kid. As a kid in the '70s in Santa Monica, there were socialists and Jane Fonda and all that.

Now, later on in my life, South Central feels like a military state, a police state: The police follow you, drive up in back of your car, run your license plate. On the West Side, people look at you with suspicion, like, "What are you doing here?" You would feel something odd from the West Side citizens, or they would call about this strange man walking back and forth, or watch you a little too much in the store. One kind of suspicion came from the police, and another came from the citizens.

KO: Are you describing an unseen enforcing of borders?

MB: Oh, sure. The freeways create economic and racial borders in Los Angeles. South of Interstate 10 is one group of people, west of the 10 another, and south of the 405 North yet another. When the 1992 riots crossed the 10 West into more affluent areas, *then* people got nervous.

KO: How did the recent verdicts in Ferguson and New York City affect you, and how did that relate to your past experiences?

MB: Well, my mom was here for the 1965 Watts Riots, and I was here for the 1992 riots after the

Rodney King verdict. There were others, Trayvon Martin, and a couple of small ones. Los Angeles has a history of this kind of racial unrest, so it wasn't completely unfamiliar to me. When there's a hint of some racial unrest and people think that there's going to be a problem, the city locks down, everybody just goes home — the freeways are packed, people flee, they go to their homes and they lock the doors. No one comes out.

KO: So, you have the acquittal of officer Darren Wilson in Ferguson and the grand jury's decision not to indict officer Daniel Pantaleo in New York. What sort of impact do they have on you, as a person and, perhaps, as a maker?

MB: Oh, Kambui. I don't know. I mean, that's such a big question. It impacts me on every level. It's completely familiar and completely blindsides me at the same time, that these things could happen in 2015.

KO: You talked about an *unease* in South Central. Does that persist?

MB: No! It doesn't last long — business as usual.

KO: Do you feel like it's somewhere? Is it latent, or do you feel like you have to . . .

MB: It's a sleeping dragon, it's just a sleeping dragon.

KO: So when the dragon awakes, how do you negotiate being a maker in the art market, and in your day-to-day life?

MB: I'm not thinking about the art market when this stuff is happening. It just makes it a little more intense. But I think that as makers, and as black men who move through many, many different sites, we don't stay local to anything; our creativity takes us everywhere. It takes us anywhere we want to go, anywhere we choose to go, like any other person — and it is not unfamiliar for me to be in a situation where I'm the only black person.

I mean, that happens when you're in Tibet or when you're in China, and when you're in some other place where they never encounter black people. It's not that different, it is just more intense because everybody wants easy answers. They want us to turn off our criticality. And I just don't do that.

I don't believe in blanket statements on race. I feel like everybody wants to flatten it down to just a black-and-white thing, and god damn it! As black artists, we are constantly demanding the gaze of blackness be pluralized and opened up so that we're not carrying the responsibility for everything. I have my own private feelings — but they're mine, you know, and it's complex.

KO: Would you care to share some of those private feelings?

MB: For us as artists, we're in and out of a lot of different territories, and in some we have more privilege than in others. Does it devalue what we do in the midst of civil unrest? Should we not do it? I think that answer is, we should do it if we believe in what we do. I ask myself these questions all the time.

KO: What you bring up is something that's a long-standing debate: How many artists of color find themselves being torn between direct action — i.e., protest — and art making.

MB: At the end of the day, I'm an artist. I may make work and decide to do something political, but it will come out of an artist's position. It won't come out of society telling me I have to. If I do, it's because I choose, as an artist, to do it. Again, it's very personal.

KO: Do you ever feel pressure to make something that's *political* and *responsive*, in a way that's outside of you?

MB: Well, no. Nobody's ever said that to me, and if they did, they would certainly want to keep their mouth shut. Because no, I would not do that.

KO: What's the place of time and digestion in your process when dealing with these conditions? It sounds like things happen in the world, they come through you, and they come out in your art. But it's not necessarily a one to one, not necessarily direct.

MB: Sometimes it's just an urge. I mean, the whole urge to become an abstract painter was, to me, a very political gesture. I decided that I was not going to have people determine what it was to be black. So I said, well, I just won't do figures, I will do abstraction. And I'll be in South Central and still abstract it. That was something that was for me. I don't know where it came from, maybe just my response to people telling me — I don't know! I have my own rage like everybody else, part from here and part from there, you know?

KO: How do you process that rage? And where do you think those different sources are that feed it?

MB: There's many sources, aren't there?

KO: Yeah, oh yeah.

MB: I have a foundation, Art + Practice. I work with contemporary art, kids, and education. That's one way. I enjoy that. I find healthy ways to engage that part of me. If someone told me I couldn't sit at the table or join the conversation because I wasn't the proper black, I'd go back and say, "Yes, I am the proper black." That helps. Or if you look at it historically, at how few abstract black painters there have been, and someone says, "You shouldn't do that" — I do it because I choose to. In a weird way, you might revisit the sites of your deepest hurts. That sounds strange, but...

KO: No, no.

MB: As an adult, and as someone fully in control of who you are. Not "I got run out."

KO: Yeah, I know what you mean.

MB: Plus, I supported the Jews who came back and demanded their houses and paintings back that the Nazis had taken — I was like, hell yeah! Bank accounts, damn right! You know? So coming back, that's how I deal with it, and some things that bother me I don't even deal with at all. It just depends on what's interesting to me, certain themes that I want to investigate a little bit more.

KO: What are some of your homecomings, the places that you have reclaimed?

MB: Leimert Park, where the Art + Practice Foundation is. It's a contemporary arts social service in a traditionally black neighborhood, like Harlem. We have a few buildings, we do public lectures, we do exhibitions, contemporary art exhibitions of black artists; our first is with Charles Gaines. We work with foster kids, we have a summer program where they have jobs. We teach reading, writing, arithmetic — it's a very liberal environment, nontraditional, let your freak flag fly. Maybe I'm creating a site for people like me. When we were kids, people came to that space who were a little less traditional. I can see me in those kids. I can see it in their faces.

KO: A space that allows for exploration, a more plural acceptance and expectation of experience?

MB: Yeah, I just want to get that little Kambui or that little Mark who is on a different path. I'm not trying to take away anything. The church is next door and the Nation of Islam is around the corner. We're all there — I'm just adding shrimp to the gumbo. And it's a beautiful thing! Does that help me? Yeah, it does.

KO: Were ever attacked by the police?

MB: No.

KO: Do you ever worry about that?

MB: No. I worry about them inconveniencing me and taking my car, or just keeping me on the side of the road a little too long because maybe I didn't have the right registration — just making my life uncomfortable.

KO: How do you handle the arbitrariness of this legacy of abuse, of police brutality?

MB: I think it speaks to how many Mark Bradfords there are. I'm always pulled over, I've been given tickets, many times, and I'm really not doing anything. The police pull up in back of my car and run my plates — they don't see you as you are, they see you through a racialized negative gaze. I think the best thing is not to internalize it too much or it'll make you crazy, because you know it's going to happen again. Sometimes I ask them, why are you doing this, it doesn't seem to be right, this doesn't make sense. And sometimes I go to the police station — it just depends.

KO: How did the shooting of the two police in Brooklyn affect you?

MB: My first reaction was, I got sad. Maybe because I'm an artist, I don't know, I just get sad. Other emotions follow: You get angry, you get frustrated, all kinds of emotions start flooding in. But first, you get empathy.

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