

Kambui Olujimi



**Modern Painters: Engaging African American Artists in Talks about Police**  
 by VICTORIA L. VALENTINE  
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OVER THE PAST YEAR, visual artists have responded to the steady clip of national news stories about unarmed black men and youth being killed by police. Titus Kaphur painted the Ferguson, Mo., protestors for Time magazine; Dred Scott wrote an essay titled “Illegitimate” for the Walker Art Center on the killing of Michael Brown; and Adam Pendleton’s current exhibition at Pace London features new work inspired by the Black Lives Matter movement that has sprung up in reaction to the incidents.

For his response, Kambui Olujimi (pictured below, at left) turned to Modern Painters magazine. “As a New Yorker, an artist, and as a black man, I grappled with these events emotionally, psychologically, and spiritually,” Olujimi confides in the May issue. To further explore his own feelings and discern the perspectives of other African American artists, he is conducting a series of conversations.

He inaugurated the project with a six-page feature (available in print only), an interview with Los Angeles-based abstract painter **Mark Bradford** who talks about his experiences with police and whether the spate of lethal incidents has affected what he makes.

When asked about the acquittal of officer Darren Wilson in Ferguson and the grand jury decision not to indict officer Daniel Pantaleo in New York, how such decisions affect him, Bradford says it is “such a big question.”



He tells Olujimi, “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.”

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— Mark Bradford, *Modern Painters*

Bradford is one of the most successful African American artists working today. Critically recognized around the world, he is represented by mega-art dealer Hauser and Wirth and last week one of his paintings sold at Sotheby’s for more than \$4.3 million, a record for the artist. His studio is in Leimert Park, a thriving black neighborhood with economic challenges, where he recently founded Art + Practice, a community art foundation.

He grew up in Santa Monica in the 1970s, which he describes as an “all-white suburb on the coast” where the police were always there to serve you. “Then I moved back to Los Angeles after grad school, to Inglewood, which was very urban, mainly black and Hispanic, and there I saw the presence of the police a lot,” Bradford says. “I realized they weren’t there to protect: They were there to enforce the law. It was a very different relationship.”



MARK BRADFORD, "Sea Pig," 2014 (collage/mixed media, 6 buoys). | Courtesy the artist.

He says he "felt nervous in the hood and relaxed on the West Side, in Santa Monica," and likens South Central to a military or police state where police follow you and run your plates. Though the atmosphere is far less tense in Santa Monica, as a black man Bradford still feels a certain kind of suspicion from the police there and another kind of suspicion from the people who live in the area. The following are brief excerpts of Olujimi's interview with Bradford:

**On artists of color being torn between direct action and protest vs. art making.**

Mark Bradford: At the end of the day, I am 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 to, as an artist, to do it. 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 I will abstract it. — Modern Painters

**On reclaiming his Leimert Park neighborhood through Art + Practice.**

Mark Bradford: 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. ...I just want to get that little Kambui or that little Mark who is on a different path. I am not trying to take away anything. The church is next door and the Nation of Islam is around the corner. We are all there—I am just adding shrimp to the gumbo. — Modern Painters

## On the arbitrariness of police treatment and abuse.

Mark Bradford: 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, 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 right, this doesn't make sense. And sometimes I go to the police station—it just depends. — Modern Painters



OLUJIMI ENGAGES BRADFORD in a revealing conversation. I reached out to Olujimi to ask him about how his series with Modern Painters came about and what he hoped to achieve by discussing police-community relations in the magazine.

He says he proposed to do a series of interviews that tried to unpack conversations about Ferguson, Eric Garner and police brutality that were happening in the black arts community but weren't reaching a larger community.

"The idea was to do a series of interviews that took the conversation out of an informal, impromptu place and put it into a space of record and engaged the larger art community," Olujimi says.

Based in Brooklyn, Olujimi works in a range of mediums including film, photography and installation. Some of his projects are interactive involving the participation of the viewers of his work. Personal biography, storytelling and myth are also constants. He grew up and still lives in Bedford-Stuyvesant where he says he regularly interacts with local police.

"Knock on wood, I have a pretty great relationship with police in terms of one on one. I grew up in the Police Athletic League, know the local captain. I know people on the precinct council where I live. I know a bunch of cops and in my day to day it's pretty nice," Olujimi says.

"But in terms of the world outside of my neighborhood, outside of that precinct, I feel a constant threat. This idea of being at rest, of being at peace, or at ease, regardless of your relationship with a particular population of law enforcement, it'd be really hard to have that as a black man, be at ease with law enforcement. And I find that to be true with many police that I know and they are cops."

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*— Kambui Olujimi, Modern Painters*

Olujimi’s conversations aim to gauge the situation with fellow African American artists. In addition to Bradford, he says he has already conducted interviews with several more—both male and female—about police, but wouldn’t divulge any names in advance. His second interview will appear in the June issue of *Modern Painters*.

*IMAGE: Above left, Kambui Olujimi via Columbia University School of the Arts, Visual Arts*