

## **Color Theory: Arnold J. Kemp & Mark Bradford**

Luggage Store Gallery, San Francisco

Mark Bradford's first show in San Francisco, an installation of several paintings and one sculpture, presented local viewers with an opportunity to see some of the most exciting art coming out of Southern California. Bradford's large canvasses are layered with worked material, colors both vivid and muted, and subtle social reference. Bradford, who works as a hairdresser in Los Angeles, covers his canvasses with the permanent wave endpapers from hair curlers, each burned and then applied in a loose grid-like pattern, to create what he calls "horizontal landscapes." Over these papers, which create a tactile surface that's rough and frayed, Bradford paints various shades and shapes of color. Additional marks and cuts add to the effect of a heavily worked surface of beautiful decay.

Bradford's colors and paints reference the buildings and surfaces of his native South Central LA, where low-grade and inexpensive paints tend to be both bright and quickly degradable. The paintings thus take on the appearance of the exterior walls of an urban landscape, with layers of social and architectural residue exposed. The burnt roller papers add to this effect, having been transformed into a kind of collaged wallpaper.

Far from being merely some kind of gritty social realism, however, Bradford's paintings exert a subtle aesthetic wonder by virtue of their complex, worked surfaces of process and paint, while carrying a more subtle political register in the materials themselves. Bradford believes that "the history of material will still hold its referent;" here, the re-worked hair salon papers and the choices of paint and color lend the paintings a socio-historical weight and context without being didactic.

Bradford also included one sculptural installation alongside the paintings, a conceptual piece using office materials and an advertising poster for Remy Martin (a liquor that is generally geared to an African-American demographic). As an "interruption of the modernist dialogue that surrounds the paintings," this piece helped further ground Bradford's aesthetics within an ongoing conversation with "everyday" materials. Wishing to "push ideas with information that's heavily loaded" as an alternative strategy to a more overt politics of reference, while at the same time resisting the urge to become "too poetic or painterly," Bradford succeeds at producing a materialist aesthetics that is both visually stunning as well as politically potent in its coded subtleties.

Arnold J. Kemp's installation "Played Twice" featured color photographs of the artist, against a stark white background, wearing Klan hoods woven from bright "African-patterned" fabrics. The immediacy of the conflicting "codes" (black man, Klan hood, African fabric) made for a strong impact, one which was further sustained not only by the complex political resonances of the imagery, but also by the compelling formal concerns within the photographs themselves and their attention to the history of portraiture.

Amidst the framed photographs, inside a found glass display case, Kemp also showed a series of black and white photographs of himself in a suit, wearing the paper hoods that he made as patterns for the seamstress he hired to sew the African-fabric hoods. The photos had the grainy look and poses of archived portraits and, as presented on the three shelves of the display case, lent the installation a haunting sense of historical and autobiographical weight (Kemp's grandfather was a tailor in the Bahamas), inserting the artist into that history as well as further provoking viewers' uneasy sense of complicity in a racialized voyeurism. On the floor next to the display case, a video monitor played an ongoing close-up of Kemp's face, covered except for the eyes by the paper hood, which over the course of the hour-long performance slowly accumulated sweat from the artist's face. Next to the framed color photos and the display case black and whites, the video contributed to an ominous sense of lived experience, reminding us that the violence of American racism is hardly a thing of the past. The artist's eyes, gazing at us through the hood/mask of race and racism, produce an unsettling effect that takes the installation to another level of relevance and impact.

The "played twice" of the installation title refers not only to the Monk tune, but also to Kemp's ongoing formal concerns with serialism, as well as the interrogation and reworking of cultural and historical traditions of race and representation. The recent spate of publicized hate-crimes, including the lynchings of James Byrd and Mark Shepard, lent Kemp's work an even greater contemporary impact, as a high-stakes investigation by a gay African-American artist into America's racial past and present.

"Played Twice" is a bold step in Kemp's work, though not as much as a departure from his earlier work as one might initially suspect. Kemp has previously exhibited series of finely crafted drawings, using the techniques of minimalism and repetition to explore images of "traditional" African sculpture. By bringing such loaded cultural imagery into the often rarefied and austere realm of minimalism, Kemp manages to interrogate both the concerns of that tradition as well as suggest a conversation with the European avant-garde's appropriation of African aesthetics in the early twentieth century. While "Played Twice" moves into a territory of more overtly (American) racial politics, the deeply intelligent and intuitive focus on issues of form and series that mark Kemp's aesthetic concern extend a body of work that continues to deftly fuse the historical with the contemporary, the political with the aesthetic.