

BUFFALO AKG ART MUSEUM

Lesson: Abstraction and Identity



Mark Bradford (American, born 1961). *Butch Queen*, 2016. Mixed media on canvas. 104¼ x 144½ inches (264.8 x 367 cm). Collection Buffalo AKG Art Museum. George B. and Jenny R. Mathews Fund, by exchange and Gift of Pamela J. Joyner and Alfred Giuffrida, 2016 (2016:13). © Mark Bradford

Artists: Mark Bradford

Artwork: *Butch Queen*, 2016

Period/Movement: Abstract Expressionism

Grade Level: 9-12

Enduring Understandings:

Objects, artifacts, and artworks collected, preserved, or presented communicate meaning and function as a record of social, cultural, and political experiences; resulting in the cultivation of appreciation or understanding.

Essential Questions:

How does the presenting and sharing of objects, artifacts, and artworks influence and shape ideas, beliefs, and experiences?

How do objects, artifacts, and artwork collected, preserved, or presented, cultivate appreciation and understanding?

LESSON

Conceptual Basis:

Mark Bradford is an American artist from Los Angeles, California. He works with found objects and paint to create large-scale abstract collages. He began his practice by using end papers from his mother's hair salon. These translucent strips (used to protect women's hair when dyeing it) were layered, peeled, and stripped to reveal different colors and many layers of paint underneath. His process often involves building layers up, only to strip them irregularly away.

In 2016, the artist created several original works for his Buffalo AKG exhibition *Shade: Clyfford Still / Mark Bradford*. The inspiration for this exhibition was based on his admiration for the Abstract Expressionist artist Clyfford Still. (The museum owns 33 works by Still.) *Butch Queen* was created for this exhibition and acquired by the museum shortly after. Bradford's works can be found in the collections of the Buffalo AKG, the Museum of Modern Art in New York, the Tate in London, and many others. Bradford continues to explore contemporary social, economic, and political issues in a wide variety of mediums.

To make *Butch Queen*, he collaged black and white paper to canvas, sometimes splashing the black paper with bleach and water. He then cut into the thickly stacked paper fragments with a sander, creating a layered surface that emulates the strata of paper advertisements one passes while walking on city sidewalks, and also suggests the variegations of human skin. While the resulting work is abstract, the artist sees its process and materials as deeply connected to contemporary life and his own experience as a black gay man.

OBJECTIVE

Activity: *Discussion*

Begin by using the [Teaching Tips and Tools for Discussion](#), or you can have students self-guide themselves using the [Tools for Looking at an Artwork](#). An example of how to bring in information about the artist from something your student observes: It may look like layers and layers of textured paint, and although Bradford refers to his works as paintings, he doesn't actually use paint! The artist uses paper—including comic books, wrapping paper, etc.—often collected from around his neighborhood and from places he visits.

Begin a discussion with your students by asking the following questions:

- What are your initial thoughts on Bradford's approach to his practice?
- Is there a color that you connect to? How does it reflect your identity?

Artmaking Activity:

Overview: In this project, students will explore the process used by Mark Bradford, and use it as inspiration for creating their own work of self-expression.

Ask students to gather paper materials, including magazines, old books that they no longer want/need, junk mail, old wrapping paper, newspaper, etc. Next, they should organize the papers by color, and then see which colors they most identify with for this project. Students should decide if they want their work to focus on one or multiple colors.

Students can also incorporate pieces with personal value and meaning will enhance the value and meaning of the artwork. Pieces and scraps that are meaningful to the artist should be determined by them. This will also enhance the connection to the featured artwork and the artist's technique. Bradford used end papers from his mother's hair salon. Ask students to think critically about what flat objects they could utilize to make the art more about their own lives.

For a more subjective approach to Bradford's techniques, encourage students to draw an outline of something that represents them. It can be an image in their own likeness, a favorite object, someone close to them, etc.

Next, show students how to rip the found paper into thick strips. They should do this to all of the paper they have chosen to use for their work. During this process, show them how they can be mindful of placement, do they want the strips to be randomly placed, or organized in a wave or grid-like pattern? Encourage them to proceed whichever way feels natural to them.

Next, they should begin gluing down their strips inside the outline they have drawn. They should continue to glue down all of their strips until they have a few layers. Then they should let the work dry.

Next, students are to take sandpaper, or something to scrape with, and begin removing parts of their work.

In a discussion or a written reflection, ask:

- What happens to the paper when you use that material?
- Do the colors change? Does the texture change?
- Do you like how it looks? Why or why not?

Lastly, students can add lemon juice or vinegar to sections of their work to make it look like they used bleach. (Bradford uses bleach, but students can experiment with other materials.) Show them how to carefully place the liquid (using a dropper, if available) onto parts of the paper to manipulate certain sections of their work.

In a discussion or a written reflection, ask:

- How did going through this process make you feel?
- Would you do this artmaking process again? Why or why not?
- What other easily-found materials would you want to use for making art?
- What other personally meaningful materials could be incorporated into a different iteration of this project?

Optional: Share a photo or video of your artwork on Twitter or Instagram with **#BuffaloAKG** and **#MuseumFromHome**

Vocabulary:

Abstract: when a work of art uses shape, line, and color that do not clearly represent things we see in the world

Manipulate (within art): the skillful handling, controlling, or use of tools and materials

Materials:

- Various pieces of paper (magazines, old books, junk mail, old wrapping paper, newspaper, etc.)
- Extra items and materials determined by the student to increase personal meaning-making.
- Glue
- One large piece of cardboard, tag board, or a very thick piece of paper
- A drawing utensil (pencil, pen, etc.)
- Scissors (optional)

New York State Standards:

Standards: The New York State Visual Arts Standards for High School Students are divided into 3 categories, Proficient, Accomplished, and Advanced rather than by grade level. Please feel free to choose the standard that best applies to the needs of your students and class curriculum.

Standards:

Grade Level 9-12	Code	Standard
Proficient	VA:Pr6.1.HSI	Analyze and describe the effect that an exhibition or a collection has on personal awareness of social, cultural, or political beliefs and understandings.
Accomplished	VA:Pr6.1.HSII	Make, explain, and justify connections between artists or artwork and social, cultural, and political history.
Advanced	VA:Pr6.1.HSIII	Curate a collection of objects, artifacts, or artwork to affect the viewers understanding of social, cultural, and/or political experiences.

Teacher Example:

