"Mark Bradford: Sea Monsters," at the Rose Art Museum, Brandeis University, Waltham, Mass., Sept. 11-Dec. 21

For me, it's always a detail—a detail that points to a larger thing. It can be text; it can be a quote. Bits of conversation. It's always a glimpse. I start to imagine what it points to, and that's when my imagination really goes. I don't really want to know what the detail points to exactly; I like the mystery.

I was in Greece last week. I was walking around the Acropolis before the tour, and I became fascinated with how they laid the road. I kept looking down at that, rather than up at the Parthenon. It was kind of like a mosaic but very ungeometric, with each stone referencing the one before it. Sort of like—if this one is 4 feet, then the next one has to be 2 feet. One depended on the other. There was a humanity about it.

I've always been inspired by small details that make me wander. My mother would ask me, "What are you looking at so intensely?" I would answer, "Everything and nothing." She really supported my wanderings, called me Marco Polo. I was fascinated by the airport, for example, so she would drive me there. I wanted to know what people from Switzerland looked like, so she brought me to the international arrivals, to Swissair. People from Switzerland got off, and I said, "Hmmm, this is what Swiss people look like."
The show at the Rose Art Museum came out of a merchant poster on a telephone pole in South Central Los Angeles. It advertised quick loans—the kind of high-interest loans that they give people, say, to buy a used car. This poster said, "Sexy Cash. We buy ugly or old houses fast." And I thought, "Sexy cash. Hmm." I started thinking about how my studio is in South Central, and that probably this little company is not in South Central but preying on the people there who are struggling, underwater with loans and mortgages. And that made me think about the conquistadors, the history of colonization, and about trading glass beads to Native Americans—all sorts of things. We make the cash sexy, and you want it. You take our sexy cash, then we take your house. It's still the same in the 21st century as in the past—still the same exploitation for economic gain.

Then I thought about the ancient waterways that facilitated colonization—how they moved sexy cash along. Then about the mysteries of the water—how people thought the ocean was filled with monsters. And how when people think about South Central—the way it's been depicted—it's full of its own version of sea monsters. The unknown—those dark, scary waters. It's all kind of circular, but it makes sense to me.

That's how I make work. Along the way, I take notes, I read about history and popular culture. Sometimes I act out things in the studio. I go back to my mother's hair salon so I can hear three voices going all at once. I pull inspiration from everything.

I was with someone the other day, and we began to talk about something that had to do with the drag balls back in the '80s, and AIDS. She used a phrase: "that vicious New York cold." That was once slang for AIDS, for people dying. I remembered it in an instant—that desperate time. All from a phrase, a detail of language, that brought it all back—fear, struggle, sexuality, money.

I have a foundation called Art and Practice, which unites contemporary art and social service. We work with transitional youth, ages 16 to 21. We have a space in South Central where we show art, and there's an artist in residence. But we also have an 8-week course for the kids—mentoring, tutoring, therapy, job placement. We have contracts with people who hire the kids. They have a lot of critical needs that have to be addressed above all.

The way I started my foundation was this. I had moved to a new studio in the zip code 90008. I would go for walks, and I began to notice that at 10:00 in the morning, 1:00 in the afternoon, there were just too many kids around. I asked myself: Why are there so many kids? Why aren't they in school? Where are their parents? Talking to them in a park across from my studio, I found out that this zip code has one of the largest concentrations of group and foster homes. The nearby high school is something like 50 percent foster youths. So I thought, wouldn't it be interesting to address more than just this population's social needs—to engage their imaginations as well?
In the city, you're always looking around, observing everything. In some neighborhoods, your life can depend on it. The details change constantly. A poor neighborhood is policed to enforce the law, not to protect citizens. I worked in South Central and grew up in Santa Monica-I had those two places. That's why I'm comfortable going between worlds. My mother's the same way, back and forth. On one side she was a Santa Monica hippie, and on the other a South Central hairdresser in an all-black environment. There it was all about the detail. A customer might say she wasn't coloring her hair, and you'd look at the edges and they were all gray.

Life, work-it's all very organic and fluid, a laboratory. I always tell people: whatever your thing is, you just have to be in it. Jump in, you'll figure it out.

—As told to Faye Hirsch

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