Mark Bradford Will Represent U.S. at Venice Biennale

By RANDY KENNEDY   APRIL 18, 2016

Mark Bradford, the highly regarded abstract painter, has been chosen as the United States’ representative to the next Venice Biennale, opening in May 2017. The United States pavilion, with Mr. Bradford’s work, will be organized by Christopher Bedford, director of the Rose Art Museum at Brandeis University, which was chosen by the Department of State’s Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs to be the commissioning institution for the exhibition.

Mr. Bradford has recently used his influence to help found an arts-based social-services center in the South Los Angeles neighborhood where he grew up. He said in a telephone interview on Monday that he could not yet discuss details of his plans for the pavilion, but that the work would certainly touch on the political and social context in which he, as an African-American artist, has always worked.

“The black body is always a heavy politicized body, in America in particular, and so carrying that burden is kind of a birthright for me,” he said, adding: “I’m thinking a lot about what matters to me right now. And I think this is a time to put that on the table.” (Mr. Bradford is not the first African-American artist to represent the United States in Venice, but there have not been many over more than seven decades: Sam Gilliam in a group show in
1972; Robert Colescott in 1997; Fred Wilson in 2003.)

Mr. Bedford, who will be the show’s curator along with Katy Siegel, the Rose Art Museum’s curator at large, said in a telephone interview that a “collision of various events” led to his championing of Mr. Bradford for the honor, one of them being the social upheaval in recent years regarding issues like race, gay marriage, immigration and social justice.

“All of that seemed to me to make Mark particularly topical right now,” Mr. Bedford said, adding: “What he has managed to decouple, in a pretty radical way, is his work as a studio painter and his work as an activist and advocate. If we were successful in Venice, I think something like that would happen there, too.”

The selection of Mr. Bradford is a coup for the small but admired Rose Museum. In 2009 the Rose’s very existence was threatened when, in the depths of the recession, Brandeis University’s trustees voted to “transition” the museum — which was founded in 1961 and houses works by de Kooning, Warhol, Lichtenstein and other 20th-century luminaries — into a teaching center and gallery and to conduct “an orderly sale” of its works to raise money. The university later backed off its plans to sell works and, after settling a lawsuit brought by the museum’s supporters, pledged to keep the Rose “a university art museum open to the public.”