



# Groundwork: Race and Aesthetics in the Era of Stand Your Ground Law

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To cite this article: Sarah Elizabeth Lewis (2020) Groundwork: Race and Aesthetics in the Era of Stand Your Ground Law, Art Journal, 79:4, 92-113, DOI: [10.1080/00043249.2020.1779547](https://doi.org/10.1080/00043249.2020.1779547)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/00043249.2020.1779547>



Published online: 29 Dec 2020.



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**Mark Bradford, 150 Portrait Tone, 2017.**  
mixed media on canvas, 20 ft. x 25 ft. 10 in. (6.1 x  
7.9 m) (artwork © Mark Bradford; photograph  
by Joshua White, provided by the artist and  
Hauser & Wirth)

Nothing is without ground.

—Martin Heidegger

A grave. I sweat into the earth as I repair it.

—Jericho Brown

In 2016, Mark Bradford set to work on the ground of *150 Portrait Tone* (2017). A color field of found papers and acrylic paint with block text centralizes a searing scene from months earlier, when thirty-two-year-old Philando Castile was killed in his car by police officer Jeronimo Yanez at a traffic stop. Yanez had pulled over Castile for a broken taillight in Falcon Heights, Minnesota. He asked for Castile's license and registration. Castile, who had no criminal record and worked as a school supervisor at a Montessori school, complied, volunteering that he also had a legally owned firearm in the car in the compartment containing the documents. While leaning over to extract these, Castile affirmed that he was not reaching for a gun, but only submitting to the officer's request. His words offered no protection. Yanez shot Castile seven times as he sat next to his fiancée, Diamond "Lavish" Reynolds, with her four-year-old daughter in the backseat. Yanez would be acquitted of all charges.

But Reynolds had been video-recording the fatal events with her phone and began livestreaming. The video went viral. Bradford was gripped as he saw the footage of Reynolds holding four conversations nearly at once as Castile lay dying just inches away. She addressed the police officer, saying, "Please, officer, don't tell me that you just did this to him"; then said to Castile, "Stay with me"; prayed to God, "Please, Jesus, don't tell me that he's gone"; and to unknown viewers of her livestream exclaimed, "Please don't tell me he just went like that."<sup>1</sup> Bradford affixed these four utterances on the canvas as a streaming text. The regularized, stencil-shaped words visually rhymed with Reynolds's voice, which seemed unnaturally composed in the face of catastrophe—possibly an indication of shock, yet perhaps a necessary decision to present herself as unthreatening to the police officer in the wake of the fatal shooting. Reynolds's words, rendered in hues of reds, pinks, and textured blacks, cover and run off the edges of Bradford's canvas, with colors seeping through and across the letters' limits filling all intervening space. These textual pleas constitute the entire ground of the canvas, prostrating Reynolds, laying out the brutality of the event, and unfurling her words like a body at the viewers' feet.

Early drafts of the painting in Bradford's studio in 2016 consisted solely of the papered surface of stenciled words, a decision that seemed in keeping with his oeuvre of earlier gridded, cartographic, text-filled abstractions. Yet when the final version of *150 Portrait Tone* was installed at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art in 2017, it contained a new and massive central feature: snaking around, between, and under the words of the gridded text was an undulating brown and black shape, scaling up the canvas, approximating a mountainous peak. Hovering between an abstraction and the outline of a landscape mass, the uncanny form suggested a distended ground. Scholarship on Bradford has paid ample attention to his pioneering form of social abstraction but less to the significance behind his

Sarah Elizabeth Lewis

## Groundwork: Race and Aesthetics in the Era of Stand Your Ground Law

I first began to develop the ideas in this essay when I delivered the Grace A. Tanner Lecture in Human Values at Southern Utah University in 2018. The lecture evolved into a version of this essay given as the 19th Annual Navin Narayan Memorial Lecture in the Committee on Degrees in Social Studies at Harvard University on November 19, 2019. The late Navin Narayan's selflessness and dedication to social justice offered the inspiration for the development of this project. I'm deeply grateful for both lecture invitations, from Danielle Dubrasky and Anya Bassett, respectively, for the encouragement of the Narayan family, and for engagement with drafts of this text by many colleagues, including Courtney Baker, Timothy Barringer, Suzanne Blier, Adrienne Brown, Huey Copeland, Henry Louis Gates Jr., Maria Gough, Jeffrey Hamburger, Joan Kee, Robin Kelsey, Jinah Kim, Joseph Koerner, Ewa Lajer-Burcharth, Caroline Light, Jordana Moore Saggese, Tommie Shelby, Deborah Willis, Harvard graduate students Jessica Williams and Rachel Burke, and the anonymous reviewers of this article.

The epigraphs are from Martin Heidegger, "The Principle of Ground," trans. Keith Hoeller, *Man and World* 7 (1974): 207, emphasis in original; and Jericho Brown, "Shovel," *The Tradition* (Port Townsend, WA: Copper Canyon Press, 2019), 37.

1. Diamond Reynolds, as quoted by Mark Bradford in Jennifer King, "Now on View: Mark Bradford's '150 Portrait Tone,'" *Unframed*, October 17, 2017, <https://unframed.lacma.org/2017/10/19/now-view-mark-bradford%E2%80%99s-150-portrait-tone>.



**Mark Bradford, *Barren*, 2017.** gravel, dimensions variable, installation view, *Mark Bradford: Tomorrow Is Another Day*, US Pavilion, Venice Biennale, 2017 (artwork © Mark Bradford; photograph by Joshua White, provided by the artist and Hauser & Wirth)

2. See Bedford, "Against Abstraction," in *Mark Bradford*, ed. Bedford, exh. cat. (Columbus, OH: Wexner Center for the Arts; New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010), 7–29; Katy Siegel, "Somebody and Nobody," in *ibid.*, 103–19.

3. See Michel S. Laguerre, *The Informal City* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1994); Steven Nelson, "Mark Bradford's Allegorical Impulse," in *Mark Bradford*, exh. cat. (New York: Sikkema Jenkins & Co., 2006), 9–13; and Huey Copeland, "A Range of Convergences," *Parkett* 89 (2011): 152–59.

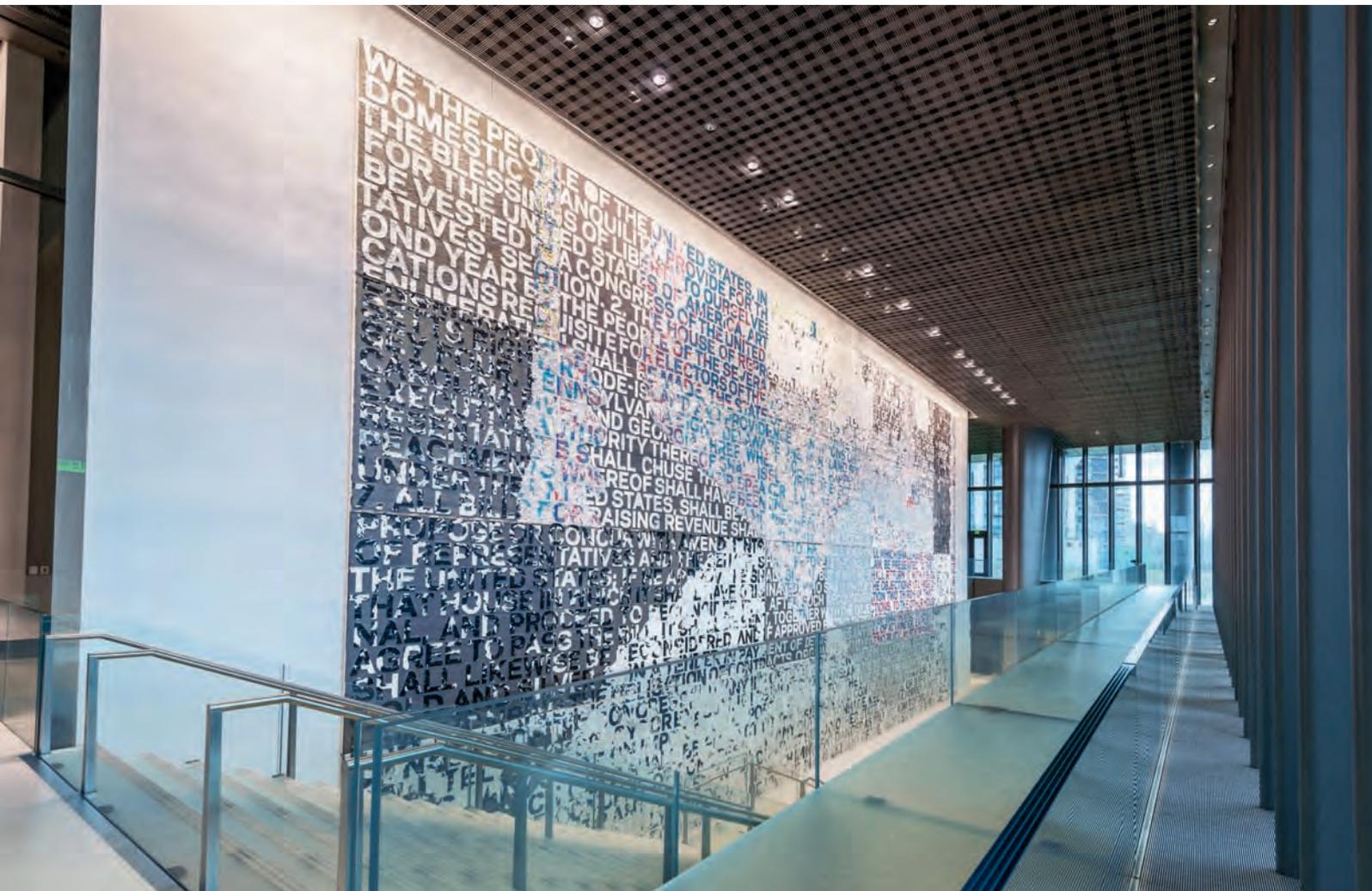
4. For Bradford's discussion of paper as a form of "frozen pigment," see Huey Copeland, "Painting after All: A Conversation with Mark Bradford," *Callaloo* 37, no. 4 (Fall 2014): 824.

5. Bradford quoted in Lanre Bakare, "Mark Bradford: The Artist and Ex-hairdresser Forcing America to Face Ugly Truths about Itself," *Guardian*, November 17, 2017.

recent engagement with the ground. Bradford insistently lays down and deconstructs the ground both as material and conceptual foundation, as sullied and, at times, potentially redeemed.<sup>2</sup>

Bradford's practice began and remains a process of ambulatory digging into politicized grounds. He scoured the cityscape of his hometown of South Central Los Angeles for used, worn, and discarded papers from the informal economy shaped by the nexus of property, industrialization, and commerce—signs advertising goods and services.<sup>3</sup> With these found papers, which offered a source of pigment when wet, as well as others he purchased, he would build up his multi-layered and multihued canvas and then dig and rip into it to construct the composition.<sup>4</sup> His selection of found paper—initially including translucent "end papers" from his time as a hairdresser—became a conceptual device to push against what he framed as racial and social exclusion, a way of "pulling things that don't belong in the art world and willing them into it."<sup>5</sup>

In the past few years, Bradford's practice has inspired a body of work focused on the conceptual foundations of American democracy. While painting *150 Portrait Tone* in 2016, he was at work on three other major projects. Selected to represent the United States at the Venice Biennale in 2017, he was creating an installation, *Tomorrow Is Another Day*, for the American Pavilion. He had also been commissioned by the US Embassy in London to create a mural that became *We the People*, a large-scale painting of thirty-two panels, each ten square feet, based on excerpted text from the US Constitution. He was also at work compiling *Pickett's Charge* (2017), a nearly four-hundred-foot-long work based on Paul Dominique Philippoteaux's nineteenth-century cyclorama of the Civil War battle of Gettysburg (1883), to be



**Mark Bradford, *We the People*, 2017**, mixed media on canvas, 32 panels, overall 40 x 80 ft. (12.19 x 24.38 m) (artwork © Mark Bradford; photograph provided by the artist and Hauser & Wirth)

6. Copeland, "Painting after All," 814.

7. This term "groundwork" is not in conscious dialogue with Karl Marx's term *Grundrisse*, used in an early elaboration of Communist history and a commentary on the connection between property and personal interactions and freedom, as discussed in his unfinished manuscript "Grundrisse der Kritik der politischen Ökonomie" (Fundamentals of political economy criticism). See Marx, *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy*, trans. Martin Nicolaus (New York: Random House, 1973).

8. Caroline Light, *Stand Your Ground: A History of America's Love Affair with Lethal Self-Defense* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2017), 8, 155. Light's scholarship on SYG law has been of enormous value as I developed this project.

displayed for four years on a curved gallery wall of the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden in Washington, DC. Whereas previously his works had (as Huey Copeland put it) been fixed at once on "the historical, the cartographic, and the architectural while remaining resolutely abstract," with these new paintings, Bradford developed a deliberate, compositional insistence on ground.<sup>6</sup> Distinct from landscape, "ground" afforded the artist a way to consider, in ways both painterly and discursive, justice-oriented social and legal foundations.

Bradford is one of a number of contemporary artists, including Amy Sherald, Hank Willis Thomas, and Kehinde Wiley, who have innovated conceptual, compositional, and material tactics that create what I term "groundwork." By groundwork, I mean a set of aesthetic strategies through which the literal and figurative meaning of ground is destabilized productively to establish new conditions in the era of Stand Your Ground law.<sup>7</sup> Stand Your Ground (SYG) laws in the United States, first established in 2005 in Florida, define the right to self-defense and to claim the ground on which one stands if there is a perception of "reasonable threat."<sup>8</sup> As Caroline Light assiduously details, to date there exist some version of SYG laws in thirty-three states, some of which have higher homicide rates than



**Mark Bradford, *Mark Bradford: Pickett's Charge*, 2017**, mixed media, 8 panels, each 11 ft. 7 in. x 40 ft. (3.5 x 12.2 m), installation view, Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington, DC (artwork © Mark Bradford; photograph by Cathy Carver; provided by the artist and Hauser & Wirth)

9. *Ibid.*, 12.

10. See *Cato v. United States*. I'd like to thank Joan Kee for her generous feedback on an early draft of this article that prompted my decision to focus squarely on the concept of the "ground" and for her scholarship in Kee, *Models of Integrity: Art and Law in Post-Sixties America* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2019), along with Joseph Koerner for his sustained, thoughtful engagement with various iterations of my development of the theory of groundwork.

11. See Mia Fischer and K. Mohrman, "Black Deaths Matter? Sousveillance and the Invisibility of Black Life," *Ada: A Journal of Gender, New Media, and Technology* 10 (2016), <https://adanewmedia.org/2016/10/issue10-fischer-mohrman/>. Ariella Azoulay anticipated the shift from the sovereignty of the photographer to the agency of the subject in creating images that impact civic life, in Azoulay, *The Civil Contract of Photography* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008). Courtney Baker, Elizabeth Alexander, and Karla F. C. Holloway are among the many scholars who have incisively analyzed the ethical dimensions of looking in the context of violence against Black bodies in the United States. See Baker, *Humane Insight: Looking at Images of African American Suffering and Death* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2015); Alexander, "Can You Be BLACK and Look at This? Reading the Rodney King Video(s)," in *Black Male: Representations of Masculinity in Contemporary American Art*, ed. Thelma Golden, exh. cat. (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1994), 91; and Holloway, *Passed On: African American Mourning Stories; A Memorial* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003).

12. Jasmine Nichole Cobb, *Picture Freedom: Remaking Black Visuality in the Early Nineteenth Century* (New York: New York University Press, 2015). See also Simone Browne, *Dark Matters: On the Surveillance of Blackness* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015).

states without them. The proliferation of SYG laws followed the 2008 Supreme Court District of Columbia *v. Heller* decision, which upheld the right to keep and bear arms for self-defense. The majority opinion rested on Justice Antonin Scalia's "originalist" interpretation of the Second Amendment, a temporal contextualization that does not recognize how the law disproportionately affects Black and Brown lives today. The right to use deadly force to protect oneself while in one's home, known as the castle doctrine, based on an early seventeenth-century case, was meant to offer legal protection from a violent home invasion with force. Yet Light argues that this doctrine, when "translated to the slave-holding colonies in North America," excluded "people who were themselves considered property—such as enslaved Africans and African Americans—from the legal capacity to defend themselves from white violence."<sup>9</sup>

The emergence of groundwork aesthetics during the SYG era is of distinct significance. This period has witnessed a new civic tradition of visual documentation, as was the case with Reynolds, to counter what often appears to be the groundlessness or baselessness of the law. (Indeed, synonyms and antonyms of the terms "grounded," "on the ground that," and "ground for dismissal" are often used in legal arguments including, ironically, in the cases about reparations.)<sup>10</sup> Visually capturing events has become a response to and, at times, a defense against the disproportionate number of killings of largely Black bodies in the American public landscape.<sup>11</sup> This legacy is born of what Jasmine Nichole Cobb, a scholar of art and visual culture, has called the "ocular culture" of surveillance that defined slavery and fugitivity and which helped to establish the long history of the hypervisibility of racial terror.<sup>12</sup> The aim here, however, is not to document the temporal shifts that have occurred within the SYG era, but rather to interrogate a consistent feature of groundwork aesthetics.

Groundwork aesthetics emerging in contemporary art intersect with philosophical work on the ground of history and on the history of the concept of "ground." For artists to render a landscape, they must create a picture that is "the contrary of the ground," as Jean-Luc Nancy has put it.<sup>13</sup> In the history of art, the picture plane constitutes both the concrete ground of the image and also a repudiation—the flat surface that bears the paint is at odds with the dimensional illusions that representational painting is bound to give. Recent philosophical engagements with the pictorial ground are never far from the Heideggerian investigations of the "groundedness" of what we consider to be history, which is to say, the reasons or causes behind it.<sup>14</sup> Exploring this domain in the modern age

13. Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Ground of the Image*, trans. Jeff Fort (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), 58.

14. While a fuller engagement with Meyer Schapiro's critique of Martin Heidegger's understanding of Vincent van Gogh via his essay "On the Origins of a Work of Art" is not within the scope of this article, it is important to highlight that the idea of the ground or *Boden* in the Heideggerian tradition is connected to a rootedness and territorialism in ways that diverge from its connotation in this contemporary context. See Schapiro, "The Still Life as a Personal Object—A Note on Heidegger and van Gogh," in *The Reach of Mind: Essays in Memory of Kurt Goldstein*, ed. Marianne Simmel (New York: Springer Publishing, 1968), 203–9; Martin Heidegger, *Der Satz vom Grund* (Pfullingen, Germany: Neske, 1957), 191–211; and Martin Heidegger, "The Principle of Ground," trans. Keith Hoeller, *Man and World* 7 (1974): 207–22.

15. Michael Allen Gillespie, "The Question of History," in *Hegel, Heidegger, and the Ground of History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 24.

16. Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), 13; Saidiya V. Hartman, *Lose Your Mother: A Journey along the Atlantic Slave Route* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007), 6, 45, 73, 107, 133. This article's meditation on the term "precarity" and ideas of futurity is, too, in dialogue with Kara Keeling, *Queer Times, Black Futures* (New York: New York University Press, 2019).

17. T. J. Clark, "Painting at Ground Level," Tanner Lectures on Human Values, Princeton University, April 17–19, 2002 (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2004), 135.

18. *Ibid.*

19. *Ibid.*, 134–35, 152.

20. Here I am thinking of the expanded notion of sovereignty as found at the intersection of and also the distinctions between Black and Indigenous studies focusing on environmental mutuality. See Tiffany Lethabo King, *The Black Shoals: Offshore Formations of Black and Native Studies* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019); Tiya Miles, *The House on Diamond Hill: A Cherokee Plantation Story* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010); and Mark Rifkin, *Fictions of Land and Flesh: Blackness, Indigeneity, Speculation* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019).

21. Bradford, having studied the practice of *décollage* in post–World War II era Paris, considers Jacques de la Villegue, Raymond Hains, and Mimmo Rotella among his influences. Bradford, in-person interview with the author, December 22, 2005. See also Sarah Lewis, "Mark Bradford: The Evidence of Things Not Seen," in *Street Level: Mark Bradford, William Cordova, and Robin Rhode*, ed. Trevor Schoonmaker, exh. cat. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007).

22. Bradford quoted in Smithsonian Institution press release, March 20, 2017, <https://hirshhorn.si.edu/exhibitions/mark-bradford-picketts-charge/>.

requires asking, as philosopher Michael Allen Gillespie frames it, not "What is history?" but instead "What is history?"—namely, what is the ground of history.<sup>15</sup> The aesthetic investigations of ground under discussion here also engage Christina Sharpe's articulation and meditation on being "in the wake," with this groundlessness of law born of what Saidiya V. Hartman considers the "afterlife of slavery," settler colonialism, and democracy in the United States.<sup>16</sup>

Groundwork aesthetics push the conceptual limits of what T. J. Clark frames as art created from a fixation on "ground level," that is, art that takes the upright physical form as a "subject in its own right."<sup>17</sup> Clark's project focused on compositional engagements with the ground such that it "becomes something other than a notional 'plane'"; rather, in his words, it becomes "a grounding, a limit condition of the human; and further, it becomes a world in itself."<sup>18</sup> By analyzing the cultural project as it spans centuries and cuts across "ideological boundaries," Clark argues that these artists are wrestling with "uprightness" as a "value" or a "great fact of human existence."<sup>19</sup>

The artists under consideration challenge the semantics of the ground by framing upright physical posture not as a "value" alone, as Clark terms it, but as a condition of sovereignty, as a stance connected to power incontrovertibly affected by the decimation of Indigenous populations as well as the "afterlife of slavery" and Jim Crow-era terror tactics.<sup>20</sup> These artists ask: What does it mean to not be able to "stand your ground"? What are the tools available to prompt a meditation on this question? Is there methodological room in the discipline of art history to consider what we make of these artistic practices focused on bodies denied this upright position of self-sovereignty and agency? Bradford's work typifies how these artists both explicitly and implicitly call for an expanded set of methods to accommodate how artists are formally addressing the racialized and political forces that create an artwork's conceptual and material ground.

Groundwork expands what constitutes ground itself in aesthetic practice through certain "gothic" tactics (see below) focusing on precarity and migration. My focus is on the compositional attention to groundlessness and precarity as a strategy through which to challenge and reconceive what is meant by the foundations of the history of racial representation and rights in the United States. While Bradford drafted *150 Portrait Tone* in his Los Angeles studio, he was also transforming Philipoteaux's scene of the failed Confederate offense, *Pickett's Charge*, into a scene of instability on an adjacent wall. He glued layers of paper with grossly enlarged, pixilated images of Philipoteaux's original traveling cyclorama (first shown in Boston and later at the 1893 World's Fair) onto eight panels, each twelve feet high and up to fifty feet in length. Then he tore those piled reproductions by cutting, scraping, and tugging at twine he had embedded in the layers. On a visit I took to his studio, I saw Bradford start to rip up the layers, showing me pieces in his hand as if gathering stones or shells from a vast beach. This muscular process of *décollage* left edges of paper pulp that flagrantly hang off the canvas, now a mass of caked, stratigraphic bands of undulating and textured layers of colored paper.<sup>21</sup> "Politically and socially, we are at the edge of another precipice. I'm standing in the middle of a question about where we are as a nation," Bradford said in a statement for his installation, a composition insistent on creating a sense of groundlessness as a precondition to a new future.<sup>22</sup> Very few indices of the original skirmishes, objects, figures, or soldiers from the Civil War history painting remain.



**Mark Bradford, detail of Mark Bradford: *Pickett's Charge*, 2017**, installation view, Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington, DC (artwork © Mark Bradford; photograph by Cathy Carver, provided by the artist and Hauser & Wirth)

**Mark Bradford, *Spoiled Foot*, 2016**, mixed media on canvas, lumber, luan sheeting, and drywall, dimensions variable (artwork © Mark Bradford; photograph by Joshua White, provided by the artist and Hauser & Wirth)

Visitors to Bradford's work in the Hirshhorn gallery are provided magnifying glasses, a confirmation of the confusion and disorientation it provokes from the severe abstraction and its installation in the open, cylindrical chamber. As Tobias Wofford notes, searching the canvas for moments of legibility or clues to connect Bradford's contemporary interpretation to the Civil War battlefield scenes in the cyclorama is futile.<sup>23</sup>

Bradford created this work alongside his installation for the 2017 American Pavilion at the Venice Biennale, where he altered the graveled and typically manicured grounds of the entrance through an installation of strewn trash—paper, debris, and ephemera—deliberately imported from Los Angeles (Barren, 2017). Visitors stepped gingerly around debris to enter the first salon of the pavilion, entitled "Mark Bradford: *Tomorrow Is Another Day*," referencing part of the final line of the film *Gone with the Wind* as seen through his eyes—a signal of Bradford's continued recursive investigation of this mediated history of American racial politics. The first room was entirely subsumed by the distended sculptural painting *Spoiled Foot* (2016), a concave canvas mass suspended from the ceiling nearly to the floor that physically forces the viewer back nearly to the perimeter of the room upon entering. This expands the scope of Clark's ground-level considerations. The surface of this bulging form, rendered in blood red, orange, and white, is mottled with black spheres as if diseased and metastasized, reflecting Bradford's sense of the world in a state of epic collapse. In a pavilion funded almost entirely by the US State Department, viewers were forced to walk "on the margin," as Bradford said.<sup>24</sup> To enter was to be unsure of one's footing and then forcibly displaced.

*Spoiled Foot* references aspects of nineteenth-century gothic visual traditions

23. Tobias Wofford, "Mark Bradford: *Pickett's Charge*," *Panorama* 4, no. 2 (2018).

24. Bradford quoted in Christopher Bedford and Mark Bradford, "Loose Like a Shawl: Christopher Bedford and Mark Bradford," in *Mark Bradford: Tomorrow Is Another Day*, ed. Katy Siegel and Bedford, exh. cat. (New York: Gregory R. Miller; Berlin: Hatje Cantz, 2017), 123.





**John Quidor, *The Money Diggers*, 1832**, oil on canvas, 15 $\frac{7}{8}$  x 20 $\frac{7}{8}$  in. (40.5 x 53.2 cm). Brooklyn Museum, gift of Mr. and Mrs. Alastair Bradley Martin, 48.171 (artwork in the public domain)

exemplified in John Quidor's painting *The Money Diggers* (1832), with its focus on the earth in a curious state of instability. The composition centers a gap-mouthed pit in the earth on a pitch-black night, with a Black man, rendered in brown and green almost indistinguishable from the ground, crawling out at the feet of alarmed figures—a scene of horror from the eponymous collection of tales by Washington Irving. Sarah Burns has undertaken a close reading of this painting through what she terms the visual gothic, distinct from an architectural or literary gothic as a “haunting” that often is borne obliquely of a reckoning with slavery and the “pernicious inequalities of gender, class, and ethnicity” that shaped the political and social conditions of democracy in the United States.<sup>25</sup> Quidor based his painting on a scene in the tale “The Adventure of a Black Fisherman,” about a cabbage farmer's search for treasure that joins him to a healer and a caricatured Black fisherman, “Mud Sam,” who attempts to locate the spoils—a satire of the risky Jacksonian market of speculation. At the moment when the fisherman digs a hole by firelight, he hits an object and finds that it is hollow, and the environment becomes haunted with the presence of a spectral buccaneer. To convey this pivotal moment, Quidor not only renders the visceral response to this shock found in the book: the figures recoil and seek cover in their thwarted pursuit of reward and stability. Here he goes further than Irving's text in aligning blackness, both figuratively and spatially, with the shape of the unstable ground as the means to convey terror.<sup>26</sup>

Bradford's aim was for the pavilion to convey viscerally his own sense of being foundationally “pushed out” or expelled when considering the foundational grounds of American life.<sup>27</sup> At the conclusion of the pavilion installation

25. Sarah Burns, *Painting the Dark Side: Art and the Gothic Imagination in Nineteenth-Century America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 3, 21.

26. Burns aptly notes that Quidor takes the gothic tones of Irving's tale to extremes not found in the text through this focus on aligning blackness with terror. For more on Quidor, see *ibid.*, 101–2, 105–6, 108–9, 125.

27. Bradford quoted in Jori Finkel, “An Artist's Mythic Rebellion for the Venice Biennale,” *New York Times*, April 27, 2017.



**Mark Bradford, still from *Niagara*, 2005.** color video, no sound, 3:17 min., edition of 5 (artwork © Mark Bradford; image provided by the artist and Hauser & Wirth)

28. See Zadie Smith, “Niagara,” in Siegel and Bedford, *Tomorrow Is Another Day*, 82–93.

29. Bradford quoted in “Anita Hill in Conversation with Mark Bradford,” in Anita Hill, Sebastian Smee, and Connie Butler, *Mark Bradford* (London: Phaidon Press, 2018), 32.

30. Bradford, telephone interview with the author, July 2020.

31. See Lorna Roth, “Looking at Shirley, the Ultimate Norm: Colour Balance, Image Technologies, and Cognitive Equity,” *Canadian Journal of Communication* 34, no. 1 (2009): 116. See also Lorna Roth, “The Delicate Acts of ‘Colour Balancing’: Multiculturalism and Canadian Television Broadcasting Policies and Practices,” *Canadian Journal of Communication* 23, no. 4 (April 1988): 487–506. I engage this scholarship in Sarah Lewis, “The Racial Bias Built into Photography,” *New York Times*, April 25, 2019.

32. See Nicole R. Fleetwood, *On Racial Icons: Blackness and the Public Imagination* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2015), 8–10; Elizabeth Edwards, *Anthropology and Photography, 1860–1920* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1992); Kathleen Stewart Howe, *First Seen: Portraits of the World’s Peoples, 1840–1880*, exh. cat. (Santa Barbara, CA: Santa Barbara Museum of Art, 2004); Stephen Jay Gould, *The Mismeasure of Man* (1981; repr., New York: W. W. Norton, 1996); and Molly Rogers, *Delia’s Tears: Race, Science, and Photography in Nineteenth-Century America* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010).

was a large-scale projection of his video *Niagara* (2005). The frame holds for an extended time on the swishing walk of an African American man seen from behind in sneakers and socks pulled up and wearing tight, high-waisted shorts. He often passed by Bradford’s studio, at times with a baseball bat to protect himself.<sup>28</sup> This contemporary *Rückenfigur* faces down an urban terrain as he claims the security of his path. “The last room is really about me again, walking the earth,” Bradford said, referring to this piece. “It is not me walking literally. . . . But it is about me, as I am, vulnerable body, walking the earth.”<sup>29</sup>

It is within this context that Bradford completed *150 Portrait Tone*, a title that references how aesthetics have historically crafted the contested ground of racial justice. “150 Portrait Tone” is a commercial painter supplier’s name for the slightly pink acrylic—akin to Crayola’s “flesh” crayon, later renamed “peach”—that provides much of the ground of the color field of Bradford’s painting. Embedded in the decision to call one color “portrait tone” is the consideration of whiteness as a normative designation. The pigment’s title conveys that it is part of an ascending, linear, systematized framework for delineating color as connected to racial hierarchy, naturalized in aesthetic traditions. Bradford deliberately used the peach color, 150 Portrait Tone, unmixed, straight from the container.<sup>30</sup> Indeed, a peach, light pink color once guided the photographic studio laboratory’s process of defining a “normal” portrait range. As Lorna Roth argues, this was epitomized in the invention of “the Shirley card,” an image of a white woman that film processing companies, largely in the United States, used to calibrate the ideal chromatic range of a photographic print.<sup>31</sup> As Roth’s research demonstrated, it took complaints from chocolate and furniture manufacturers unable to show the difference between tones of these products to spur Kodak to create a separate film that had a broader dynamic range and altered the chemical composition in film. With the use of color, title, and Reynolds’s verbal plea, Bradford’s work questions what historic ground undergirds the fatality embedded in racial profiling. Vision in the SYG era, he suggests, is conditioned by the foundation of nineteenth-century racial science that reduced Black subjects to racialized “types.”<sup>32</sup>

Bradford’s investigation came with a productive clarion call to expand the methods used to understand his work. He made this demand plain with a direct address to critics. “Look . . . I know I have to engage art history, and I am going to

be a painter, and I know that modernism is on the table, I'm just trying to tell you there's more here than what you're seeing now," he explained in the rounds of press interviews that accompanied the debut of these landmark murals and installations. "All you're seeing is linear grids because that's where I am but stay tuned."<sup>33</sup> He then addressed how to train our gazes to see the racialized history of our aesthetic conventions: "What does it mean to unpack that moment, when both Jackson Pollock and Emmett Till were on magazine covers?" Bradford asked this question while speaking about his interest in 1950s abstraction and the history of racial terror, but he formulated the question as one pertaining directly to the discipline of art history itself.<sup>34</sup> In his own work, Bradford has forced the conceptual extension down to his titles. One of his paintings from 2001 references Agnes Martin's print suite *On a Clear Day* (1973) with the title *On a clear day, I can usually see all the way to Watts*. Yet Bradford's practice does not engage with the "abstract sublime" on its own terms, with its "covert allusions to nature" (as Rosalind Krauss argued was the case with Martin).<sup>35</sup> By deliberately alienating us from the sublime and the experience of nature, Bradford aims not to allude to American landscape conventions—the vaunted tradition that most engaged with the cultural project of nation-building in the nineteenth century—even if the distended, snaking form that unifies the field in *150 Portrait Tone* partially conjures them. Instead, or rather by way of this ghost of landscape past, his groundwork challenges how we define the culture deliberately left out of these genres. While Bradford's Art + Practice Foundation, based in the Leimert Park neighborhood of South Los Angeles, is often seen as the site of this more social engagement, his groundwork has created a new strategy through which to locate what Copeland called the "ethical imperatives" of his painting practice.<sup>36</sup>

This methodological question is significant since compositional groundlessness is both a historic condition of African American visual representation and a reemergent aesthetic tool for indicating the unfinished reckoning with the history of racial terror. Artists have long depicted the slippage between subject and object that has led to the asymmetry within the SYG laws: who is being protected and what (or who) may lay claim to one's place.<sup>37</sup> One of the best-known examples is the "selfie" photograph of Trayvon Martin, killed by George Zimmerman on February 26, 2012, in Sanford, Florida. Art and cultural historian Nicole R. Fleetwood centers this image in her probing study of racial icons, noting that the top-lighting in Martin's "selfie" photograph gives the effect of a haloed, disembodied head, which partially accounts for its iconicity.<sup>38</sup> This compositional feature foundationally impacted artistic representation of African American subjects during early periods of contested citizenship. An example comes to us in the set of drawings made by William H. Townsend circa 1839–40, during the trial of the *Amistad* slave ship rebellion in New Haven, Connecticut, where the enslaved Mende remained awaiting their trial with a defense mounted by former president John Quincy Adams. In twenty-two portraits, Townsend drew the outline of Mende heads and busts in graphite traces that offer a sense of how they fashioned themselves, controlled their gaze, smiled or not in his presence. What is most compositionally present is the emptiness—each head is placed as if floating in the upper picture plane, marking it as a kind of provisional portraiture. Cobb's study of the marriage of racial subjecthood, slavery, and representation in nineteenth-century visual culture argues that this blankness signals the attempt to

33. Bradford cited in "Loose Like a Shawl," in Siegel and Bedford, *Mark Bradford: Tomorrow Is Another Day*, 113.

34. Bradford quoted in Alina Cohen, "AIDS, Abstraction, and Absent Bodies: A Conversation with Mark Bradford," *Hyperallergic*, December 9, 2015, <https://hyperallergic.com/260045/aids-abstraction-and-absent-bodies-a-conversation-with-mark-bradford/>.

35. Rosalind E. Krauss, "Agnes Martin: The / Cloud/," in *Bachelors* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999), 78. I follow Barry Schwabsky's assessment that contemporary landscape painting, flourishing and undergoing reinvention, however overlooked due to the conditioning and dominance of abstraction, often contains allusions to nature as decried by Krauss and Yve-Alain Bois. Schwabsky, "Painting with the Flow of the World," in *Landscape Painting Now: From Pop Abstraction to New Romanticism*, ed. Todd Bradway (New York: Thames and Hudson, 2019), 13–15.

36. Copeland, "Painting after All," 819. For the history of Brockman Gallery and Brockman Productions in Leimert Park, see Kellie Jones, *South of Pico: African American Artists in Los Angeles in the 1960s and 1970s* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017), 145–51. In the spirit of full disclosure, I should mention that I was invited to become a board member of the Art + Practice Foundation only after I submitted this article for publication.

37. See Cheryl Harris, "Whiteness as Property," *Harvard Law Review* 106, no. 8 (1993): 1707–91.

38. Fleetwood, *On Racial Icons*, 8–10.



**William H. Townsend, *Fuli*, from *Sketches of the Amistad Captives*, ca. 1839–40**, pencil, 7 $\frac{3}{8}$  x 5 $\frac{5}{8}$  in. (19.2 x 14.5 cm). General Collection, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven, CT (artwork in the public domain; photograph provided by Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University)

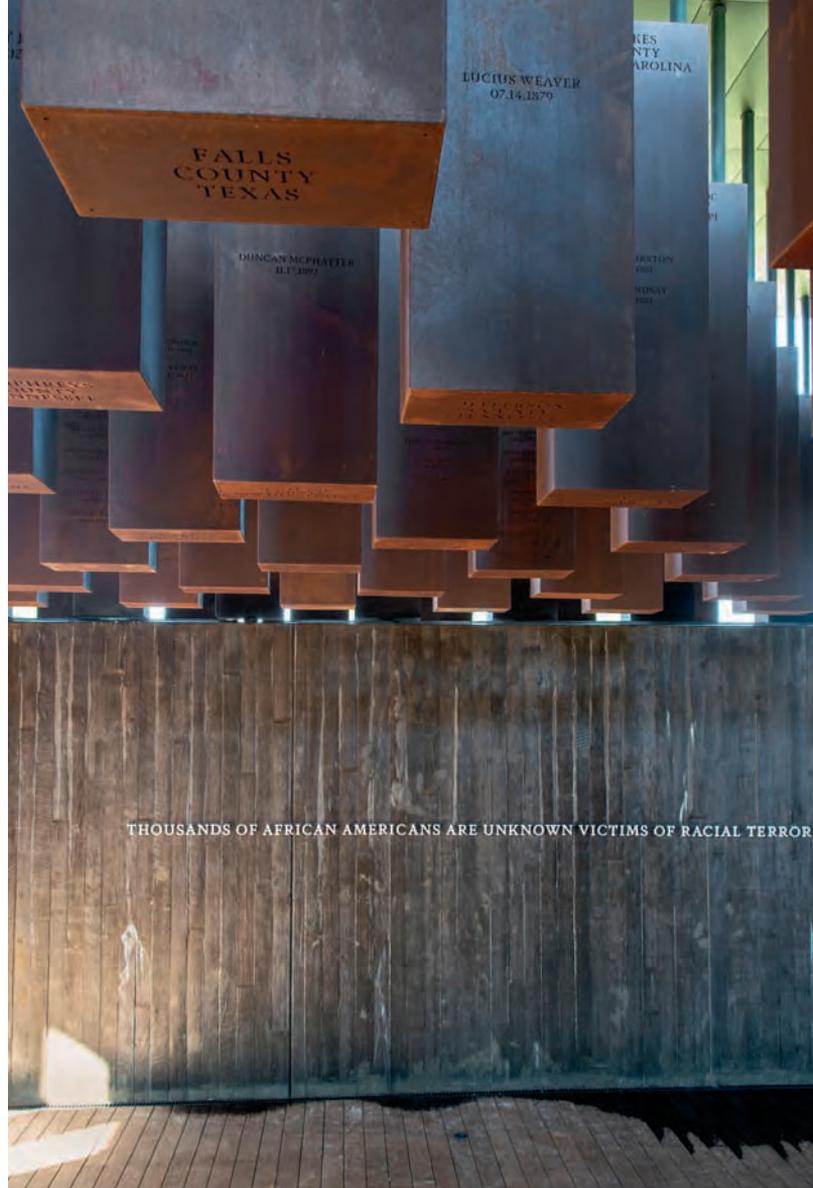
place the Mende—themselves in a suspended state as they awaited a decision about their status as free or enslaved—in a new conditional context.

In *The Souls of Black Folk*, W. E. B. Du Bois also presaged this consideration with the literal and figurative signification of “ground” in the context of Reconstruction. According to Adrienne R. Brown, Du Bois fixes on the residue of slavery found in the dilapidation of the built environment in his “Black Belt” chapter on Dougherty County, Georgia.<sup>39</sup> He catalogs the “falling homes” with “bricks . . . falling out” of buildings, and others with “worm-eaten pillars,” one with a “moss-grown roof” that was “falling in,” all in a state of impending collapse.<sup>40</sup> As I discuss at length in the book project on which this article is based, Du Bois’s focus here anticipates the polysemic fixation on ground, as distinct from land or property, to question, conjure, and critique what could have supported post-Emancipation visions of the future.

Yet the artists under consideration here have crystallized a new compositional device of groundlessness to visually emblemize a civic and conceptual foundation that needs to be rebuilt. One sees this in the oeuvre of Whitfield Lovell in the KIN series begun in 2008, in Xaviera Simmons’s *The Whole United States Is Southern* (2019) project, which examines Jacob Lawrence’s *The Migration Series*, in Amy Sherald’s painting *If you surrendered to the air, you could ride it* (2019), and in Theaster Gates’s installation in 2019 of the gazebo where Tamir Rice was killed. This is to say that Bradford’s engagement with groundwork aesthetics has occurred alongside other landmark works fixated on precarity that reconceive and challenge the foundational journey that led to the SYG laws. While there is not sufficient space in this essay to engage each extensively, a foray into some of

39. See Adrienne R. Brown, *The Black Skyscraper: Architecture and the Perception of Race* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2017), 28, 29.

40. W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903; repr., New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 84, 86, 90.



**National Memorial for Peace and Justice, Montgomery, AL, 2018** (photograph by Alan Ricks, provided by MASS Design Group)

the related groundwork projects on precarity shows how this phenomenon has also pushed the boundaries of these artworks to include an engagement with SYG laws in ways that reframe and extend the discourse on art, race, and migrancy.<sup>41</sup> When seen together, groundwork aesthetics and the issues of precarity they address and render speak to the urgency of this development in the field of contemporary, American, and African American art—three fields that cannot be neatly separated when considering the interpenetration of representation in the history and future of justice in this country.

Consider the form of the Equal Justice Initiative (EJI)'s National Memorial for Peace and Justice unveiled in Montgomery, Alabama, in April 2018 to honor the lives lost to lynching. Codesigned by MASS Design and framed by public installations by artists such as Hank Willis Thomas, the memorial suspends eight hundred weathered steel plinths from the ceiling of the open-air Capitoline structure that recapitulate the form of the often municipally endorsed, even celebrated public spectacles—acts of racial control and terror. Deliberately sited on a hill in Montgomery rivaling the height of the city's capitol dome, the weathered

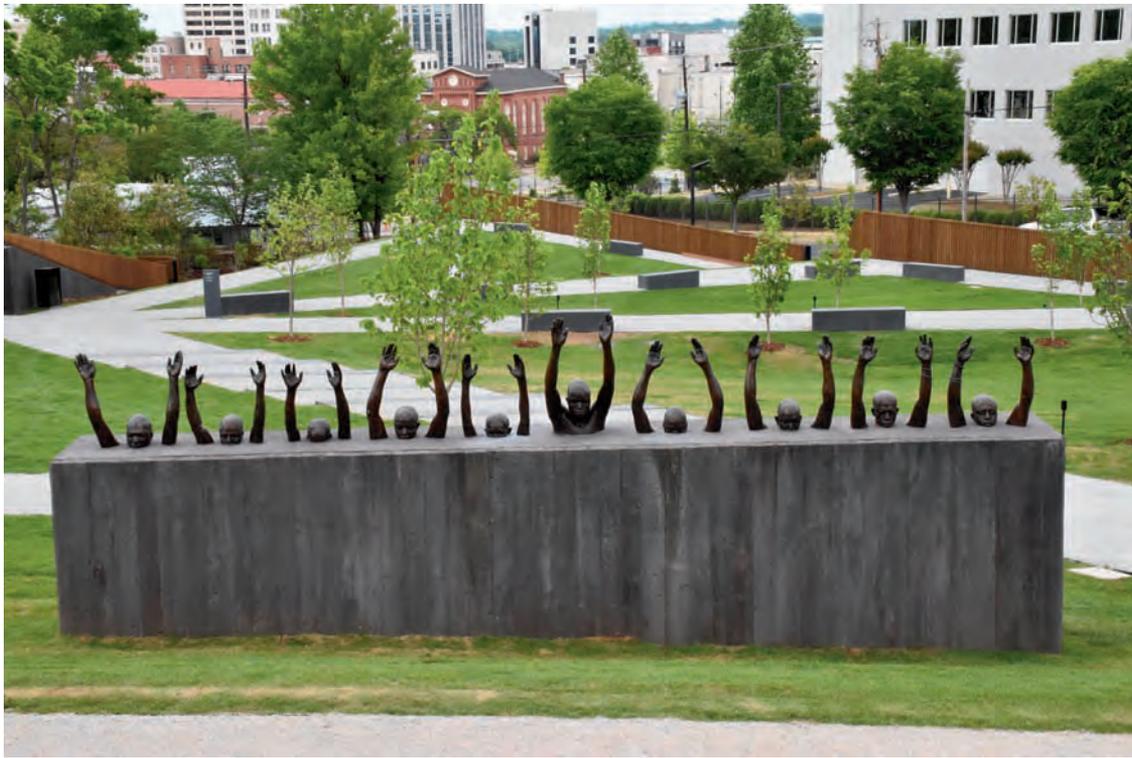
41. See Deborah Willis, Elyn Toscano, and Kalia Brooks Nelson, eds., *Women and Migration: Responses in Art and History* (Cambridge, UK: Open Book Publishers, 2019); and Tanya Sheehan, *Photography and Migration* (New York: Routledge, 2018).



**A Community Remembrance Project,  
Equal Justice Initiative Exhibit Room,  
Montgomery, AL, 2018** (photograph by the  
author)

steel columns in variegated shades of brown approximate the scale and tone of the bodies, largely African American, lynched with nooses hung from trees. Lynchings, which largely took place between 1877 and 1950, were a distinct form of extrajudicial violence meant to ensure racial inequality, a form of terrorism carried out with impunity. Many victims of lynching were murdered without ever being formally accused of any crime.

What has gone undiscussed in the critical acclaim for this celebrated memorial is that the EJI offices, built on the site of a former slave warehouse, contain another monument, an installation of soil collected from the site of every known lynching in the state of Alabama and displayed in glass jars. (A portion of this installation is now presented at EJI's Legacy Museum.) In the full installation in the office, done in collaboration with MASS Design, the clear jars of soil operate as synecdoche, each with a unique color—rust red, deep green, brown—standing for individual Black lives lost in Alabama alone. Each jar is the result of members of the community marking the site of a known or recently discovered incident of lynching. One jar stays with the community, the other comes to EJI. The graves,



**Hank Willis Thomas, *Raise Up*, 2018.**  
 bronze, 89 $\frac{7}{8}$  x 300 x 36 in. (228.3 x 762 x 91.4 cm)  
 (artwork © Hank Willis Thomas; photograph by  
 Perla de Leon, provided by Jack Shainman Gallery,  
 New York)

once unmarked, are now made; each jar is a way to “sweat into the earth” as an act of “repair,” as poet Jericho Brown might reflect on it.<sup>42</sup>

On the pathway out of the memorial stands a second version of a bronze sculpture by Thomas, *Raise Up* (2018), that connects the visual logic of policing with the legacy of racial terror. Thomas has sunk the bronze arms and heads of twelve men with their hands up and fingers outstretched in the symbolic gesture of surrender and acquiescence to power into a concrete block approximately six feet high. The composition challenges T. J. Clark’s framing of “uprightness,” defined as largely a comment on evolution or an allegorical statement about “value,” offering the example of “high standing” as a statement of worth and stating that “being supine or prostrate is never very far from lolling about and groveling.”<sup>43</sup> By contrast, Thomas uses the visual fact of uprightness and emergency conditions as a strategy to foreground rights-based struggle, expanding our sense of what Clark considers to be the “resistances” and “constraints” that work against the upright form and, in so doing, revealing how a critical race perspective is requisite for grasping this posture as a hard-won act of self-sovereignty. One could extend this analysis by considering how Thomas’s recent public art installation practice further engages with this rhetoric, perhaps most dramatically with *Looking for America* (2019). In this bronze and steel sculpture, a body has its limbs splayed out as if it were a human kite. Pants and shirt strain to stay on a body with only one hand on the floor while both legs are being gripped by disembodied forearms. The work is a volumetric appropriation of a central portion of a 1964 photograph by Danny Lyon of the arrest in Cambridge, Maryland, of Clifford Vaughns, a Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee photographer. Thomas has eliminated the dominating figures of the police in the midground.

42. Jericho Brown, “Shovel,” *The Tradition* (Port Townsend, WA: Copper Canyon Press, 2019), 37.

43. Clark, “Painting at Ground Level,” 135.



**Hank Willis Thomas, *Looking for America*, 2019**, bronze and steel, 64 $\frac{7}{8}$  x 94 $\frac{1}{8}$  x 55 $\frac{1}{4}$  in. (153.6 x 239 x 140.2 cm) (artwork © Hank Willis Thomas; photograph provided by Jack Shainman Gallery, New York)

**Danny Lyon, *Clifford Vaughs, Another SNCC Photographer, Is Arrested by the National Guard, 1964* (printed 2010)**, gelatin silver print, 8 $\frac{3}{4}$  x 12 $\frac{3}{8}$  in. (22.2 x 32.5 cm). Harvard Art Museums/Fogg Museum, anonymous gift (photograph © Danny Lyon/Magnum Photos, provided by Harvard Art Museums/Fogg Museum)



Here, he symbolizes the physical strain and sacrifice of the civic efforts to work toward racial justice through a body straining to remain upright.

This double valence of groundlessness as an incisive engagement with migrancy and precarity is a way to understand the composition of a recent painting by Amy Sherald, *If you surrendered to the air, you could ride it* (2019), her largest painting to date, with a title that quotes a line from Toni Morrison's novel *Song of Solomon*. Against a cerulean sky save a band of lightly rendered clouds, Sherald sets a lone figure of Black man in a white turtleneck on a corner of a construction I-beam at the middle of the canvas. For the vertiginous perspective, Sherald draws on a widely known image composition: the 1932 photograph *Lunch atop a Skyscraper*, recently attributed to Charles Ebbets, with eleven workmen, all ostensibly white, three of whom have been identified as Mohawk, sitting on a construction beam 850 feet high at New York City's 11 Rockefeller Plaza. Adrienne R. Brown's research on race and the development of skyscrapers reveals a paradox—the building's very materiality proves inextricably entangled with race, down to designs meant to avoid "miscegenated" facades, yet the effects of skyscrapers' abstracting scale has a reductive effect on visualizing the racial and ethnic specificity of labor.<sup>44</sup> Sherald's composition inverts what Brown recuperates from early twentieth-century writing—that the "skyscraper potentially disrupted the ability to perceive race as well as the capacity to feel raced" by her figurative focus on a Black man seen from below.<sup>45</sup> Sherald eliminates what created the dimensional impact in Ebbets's photograph—the dizzying density of New York City buildings seen from high above. In her composition, a lone Black man is perched as if an emblem of the often-unexamined racial homogeneity of the source image and its commentary on racialized class divides. His expression is calm, his eyes, piercing and direct, rendered with her characteristic grisaille.<sup>46</sup> Through the compositional tension of suspension, we are blocked from seeing the ground "scenes" of contestation, considered as Hartman might see them.<sup>47</sup>

Sherrilyn Ifill and Bryan Stevenson, among other writers and scholars, have shown that the northward migratory movement that changed the tone and racial composition of northern cities such as New York City, alongside immigration, was powered not only by opportunity but also by fear of lynching and other forms of retribution for resistance to Jim Crow rule.<sup>48</sup> Legal doctrines fueled lynching and racial terror, namely the Slaughterhouse case of 1873 and *U.S. v. Cruikshank* (1876), which ruled that the Fourteenth Amendment only protected citizens from actions of the state, not from actions of individuals, which left many, including African Americans, vulnerable to these acts of violence.<sup>49</sup> What Kevin Quashie articulates as the "quiet" and "interiority" of the man in Sherald's sparse, groundless composition allows us to consider the broader spatial coordinates that could have led to this social precarity: Jim Crow rule, lynching, and segregation that were also part of the cultural context of the 1930s.<sup>50</sup>

Indeed, Kehinde Wiley's public art statue *Rumors of War* (2019) acquires historical depth from the ground, bravura upright posture, and engagement with SYG-era violence. Unveiled in Times Square in New York City and moved to the longest-held Confederate capital city, Richmond, Virginia, the statue made a journey across contested terrain that became a compositional feature of the work. Wiley reimagined a Confederate monument in the form of a twenty-seven-foot-tall equestrian statue topped by a dreadlocked, top-knotted figure wearing a hoodie confidently

44. See Brown, *Black Skyscraper*, 2, 127–28. See also Lauren Kroiz, *Creative Composites: Modernism, Race, and the Stieglitz Circle* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012).

45. Brown, *Black Skyscraper*, 2.

46. For more on Amy Sherald's use of grisaille, see Richard J. Powell, "The Obama Portraits, in Art History and Beyond," in *The Obama Portraits*, ed. Tania Caragol, Dorothy Moss, and Powell (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2020), 55, 93; and Erin Christovale, "Notes on Amy Sherald," in *Amy Sherald*, ed. Lisa Melandri, exh. cat. (Saint Louis: Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis, 2018), 15.

47. See Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

48. See Sherrilyn Ifill, *On the Courthouse Lawn: Confronting the Legacy of Lynching in the Twenty-First Century*, foreword by Bryan Stevenson (Boston: Beacon Press, 2007).

49. See the Equal Justice Initiative publication *Lynching in America: Confronting the Legacy of Racial Terror*, downloadable at <https://eji.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/lynching-in-america-3d-ed-o80219.pdf>, as of August 2, 2020.

50. Kevin Quashie, *The Sovereignty of Quiet: Beyond Resistance in Black Culture* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2012).



**Amy Sherald, *If you surrendered to the air, you could ride it*, 2019**, oil on linen, 130 x 108 x 2½ in. (330.2 x 274.3 x 6.4 cm) (artwork © Amy Sherald; photograph by Joseph Hyde, provided by Hauser & Wirth)

**Charles Ebbets, *Lunch atop a Skyscraper*, September 20, 1932**, Rockefeller Center, New York (photograph in the public domain, provided by Bettmann/Getty Images)





**Kehinde Wiley, *Rumors of War*, 2019**, bronze with limestone base, 27 ft. 4 $\frac{3}{4}$  in. x 25 ft. 5 $\frac{3}{4}$  in. x 15 ft. 9 $\frac{3}{4}$  in. (8.35 x 7.77 x 4.82 m). Arthur Ashe Boulevard, Richmond, VA, presented by Times Square Arts in partnership with the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts and Sean Kelley, New York (artwork © 2019 Kehinde Wiley; photograph by Travis Fullerton, provided by Virginia Museum of Fine Arts)

astride a horse. When I saw the work in person with Wiley, he also focused on ground in the philosophical sense, pointing out two features: that it was reinforced by steel under the New York City sidewalk, and that he decided to embed his signature in the sculpture's rendering of soil and grass. The plinth base, he also explained, was not only able to accommodate people sitting on it but also was larger than that of the J. E. B. Stuart Confederate statue in Richmond on Monument Avenue.<sup>51</sup> This monument is now permanently installed on Arthur Ashe Boulevard, next to the headquarters of the Daughters of the Confederacy, in front of the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, and adjacent to the row of Confederate monuments on the avenue in Richmond. The rider's head is dramatically turned toward the sky, a figurative send-up of the Stuart statue and the racial legacy on which it is based.

Wiley rendered the rider's face from a composite of images of six Black men killed in Stand Your Ground law states.<sup>52</sup> The sky-facing position, in fact, a frequent pose of Wiley's sitters, offers a potential rereading of his *Down* series from 2008,

51. Wiley, in-person interview with the author, November 2019.

52. *Ibid.*



**Kehinde Wiley, *Sleep, from the Down series, 2008***, oil on canvas, 11 x 25 ft. (3.35 x 7.62 m) (artwork © 2020 Kehinde Wiley; photograph provided by the artist)

with its chilling juxtaposition of images of prone or collapsed Black men and settings drawn largely from paintings of deaths by artists such as Andrea Mantegna, Diego Velázquez, and Caravaggio that, too, recall the prostrated bodies and fatal aftermath of incidents of racial terror. In Wiley’s hands, the sky-facing direction becomes a symbolic rebuke and refusal to surrender as a matter of life or death.

These aesthetics force a consideration of how artists are working in ways to honor lives lost due to racial bias in the carceral state—an aesthetic ethics of care for Philando Castile, for Tamir Rice, for the six unnamed Black men in Wiley’s portrait, for the countless men who haunt Sherald’s image, and for the over four thousand men and women killed by lynching as memorialized by the work of the Equal Justice Initiative founded by Bryan Stevenson. As a final example, in 2018 Theaster Gates used the same aesthetic tactic of mobility by resiting the actual gazebo in which twelve-year-old Tamir Rice was killed by twenty-six-year-old Cleveland rural police officer Timothy Loehmann in 2014. On learning that it would be destroyed by the city, Gates asked Rice’s mother Samaria to allow his Rebuild Foundation in Chicago to house the structure until it found a permanent home. A gazebo, a rural visual device, is a polygonal structure positioned to offer a vantage point from which to take in a landscape. This gazebo was placed on the manicured lawn of the Rebuild Foundation’s building, ground that is, in fact, an easement, a mound required by municipal zoning regulation to prevent drive-by shootings of the nearby residences. The structure associated with Rice’s murder stands as a symbol of the interpenetration of the ground, land, and racialized life.

Wiley’s resituated and migrated statue, Sherald’s suspension, Thomas’s symbolic figuration, and Gates’s migrated gazebo set the distinction between the terms “ground” and “land” in stark relief. In his study *What Is Landscape?*, John R. Stilgoe positions security as the distinguishing feature, arguing that “ground which itself cannot sustain human life even for a few hours or days never truly achieves the status of land.”<sup>53</sup> His study is framed by an exhortation to the reader to explore the idea by accessing the land—to get out, walk, and look. What do we



**Gazebo with Theaster Gates and Samaria Rice, 2019**, structure: steel, concrete, and wood. Rebuild Foundation, Chicago, in partnership with Stony Island Arts Bank (photograph © Matt Ford)

53. John R. Stilgoe, *What Is Landscape?* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2015), 89. While there is not space to do so here, I engage fully with the historiography of landscape in the history of art as distinct from groundwork in the book-length version of this project.

make of those who have a more precarious access, namely those whom police so often profile? On what ground can one be safe?

“When I see a young black man murdered by the police on television,” Bradford has said, reflecting on his suite of works in the past few years, “I’m trying to grapple with policy. I’m trying to grapple with it personally.”<sup>54</sup> After Bradford’s creation of these legally focused works, including his installation *We the People*, Anita Hill asked the artist about the relationship between his past work and this interrogation of legal foundations. Bradford responded that they are part of the same project of “trying to grapple with the enormous history that made this country. It’s me grappling with being three-fifths of a man originally in this country in the south. Where do I fit into this document that was made when they weren’t thinking about black bodies?”<sup>55</sup>

I complete this essay alongside the publication of Fleetwood’s *Marking Time: Art in the Age of Mass Incarceration*, in which she archives, analyzes, and examines the development of “carceral aesthetics,” art made by those caught in the criminal justice system, born from “the compulsion to make, to create, and to produce meaning,” as the field of visibility at large is impacted by this moment of racial terror and reckoning.<sup>56</sup> Her deft analysis requires a methodological widening of our inherent assumptions about the network of relationships that are part of an artist’s milieu and, she argues, what is meant by “relational aesthetics” as she describes the necessary collaboration between incarcerated and nonincarcerated individuals to sustain a practice.<sup>57</sup> Groundwork aesthetics, too, not only wrestle with the discourse on looking at images of racial violence but also challenge how we define the very environment of the artist and the form that resistance can take.

In the United States, a nation that has by far the highest rate of incarceration in the world, “crime control,” as Elizabeth Hinton argues, “may be the domestic policy issue in the late twentieth century.”<sup>58</sup> Not to consider this phenomenon of groundwork aesthetics is to assume that the field of contemporary art (and therefore an artist) is somehow sealed off from a distinct shift in worldview that developed in the SYG era, born of the culture of surveillance that challenges the sovereignty of Black subjectivity. Indeed, one need only think of how this method can be extended into contemporary art philanthropy, given that Agnes Gund used the proceeds of her sale of Roy Lichtenstein’s *Masterpiece* (1962) for \$165 million to create initiatives such as the Art for Justice Fund, a criminal justice reform initiative to which Bradford was one of the first artists to offer support with a donation of a painting for auction.

Joan Kee’s periodized, landmark study of the interpenetration of art and law in the United States between 1970 and 1990 ends with an artist’s mediation on the significance of physical posture in Philando Castile’s killing—not Bradford’s canvas, but Henry Taylor’s painting *THE TIMES THAY AINT A CHANGING, FAST ENOUGH!* (2017). She considers Taylor’s decision to portray Castile as “supine” but deliberately with “his head lifted up, as if Taylor were attempting to salvage it from the wreckage.”<sup>59</sup> Here, Castile’s position is “productively ambiguous,” as the painting centralizes his suspension—focused on the head, car, disembodied police officer, and sky, with no ground in sight—as a way to telegraph the disorienting injustice of his killing. The marriage of art and law, she argues, calls attention to the law itself as “plastic,” forged of “language, aesthetic decisions, and individual behavior.”<sup>60</sup> I follow Kee in thinking that the intersection of art and law in contemporary art in the United States is the unique creation of the “neces-

54. Bradford quoted in Hill, Smee, and Butler, *Mark Bradford*, 36.

55. *Ibid.*

56. Nicole R. Fleetwood, *Marking Time: Art in the Age of Mass Incarceration* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2020).

57. *Ibid.*, 2–11, 18, 25, 32, 51, 58, 126, 154, 158, 230, 241, 257, 263.

58. Elizabeth Hinton, *From the War on Poverty to the War on Crime: The Making of Mass Incarceration in America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016), 8 (emphasis added).

59. Kee, *Models of Integrity*, 235.

60. *Ibid.*, 5.

sary psychological space” to permit the “political and affective labor needed to bridge the sometimes gaping chasm between law and justice.”<sup>61</sup> Yet parsing these works requires a shift in methodological demands of scholarship on the intersection of art, race, and representational justice offered by a capacious focus on groundwork.

Beyond providing a framework for analysis of new directions in contemporary art, what I have here called groundwork might help guide future steps that the discipline of art history will have to take in order to engage more decisively with sociopolitical life that informs artistic production in the context of racial contestation and violence. In short, groundwork, as the word implies, is the beginning of practical labor as well as theoretical reflection. For example, the question of how racial violence has structured the institutions, resources, and preservationist tactics that we use to consider, describe, and protect the outdoors has shifted the discourse in environmental history. Scholars including Carolyn Finney, Dianne D. Glave, Paul Outka, and Dorceta E. Taylor have examined the interaction of the history of racial disenfranchisement via racial terror that fueled the migratory movements of the early twentieth century, Black land loss and theft—legally conscripting the enslaved to be seen as part of the land—and a startling lack of engagement with the environmental moment and protected spaces by African Americans in particular.<sup>62</sup> If the environmental humanities have understood the structuring of the ground as inevitably connected with the topic of racial justice, then so too might art history benefit from a new methodological engagement with a critical race perspective that focuses on a capacious understanding of ground.

The presence of groundwork requires a broad investigation at the intersection of critical race studies, art history, and the politics of reception, putting productive pressure on scholarship to accommodate how artists are formally addressing the racialized and political forces that establish an artwork’s conceptual and material foundations. The polysemic focus on “ground,” as exemplified by Bradford and other visual artists, enlarges what we reflexively consider to be an aesthetics of reckoning and resistance and the important forms that Paul C. Taylor aptly calls “assembly,” as much as they do the conceptual scope of Clark’s ground level project.<sup>63</sup> In focusing on precarity and challenges to the upright form, groundworks demand that we reckon with the racial foundations that permeate and condition vision and subjectivity in the United States. Indeed, this approach, too, conceptually recalls Carl Schmitt’s important distinction between law and “nomos,” a global order dependent on spatial arrangements defined by colonial expansion, as distinct from the idea of the “law,” that obscures how the ground has shaped the legal order.<sup>64</sup> Yet groundwork is not only a phenomenon of race and aesthetics in the era of Stand Your Ground law. Through groundwork, the artists identified here, and many more, working independently in contemporary, American, and African American art, have created an indispensable framework that offers a way to understand how aesthetics mobilize a reading of the legal, social, and racial histories that generate the reasons or the grounds for contestation of racialized life in the United States—what has been wrought, maimed, and sustained under our feet.

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61. *Ibid.*, 236.

62. See Carolyn Finney, *Black Faces, White Spaces: Reimagining the Relationship of African Americans to the Great Outdoors* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014); Dianne D. Glave, *Rooted in the Earth: Reclaiming the African American Environmental Heritage* (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2010); Paul Outka, *Race and Nature from Transcendentalism to the Harlem Renaissance* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008); Dorceta E. Taylor, “Blacks and the Environment: Toward an Explanation of the Concern and Action Gap between Blacks and Whites,” *Environment and Behavior* 21, no. 2 (1989): 175–205; and Katherine McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006).

63. Paul C. Taylor, *Black Is Beautiful: A Philosophy of Black Aesthetics* (Chichester, UK: Wiley Blackwell, 2016).

64. Carl Schmitt, *The Nomos of the Earth in the International Law of the Jus Publicum Europaeum*, trans. G. L. Ulmen (New York: Telos Press, 2003), 20.