A Decade in Conversation

Interviews with

Paul Pfeiffer

Irit Batsry

Raymond Pettibon

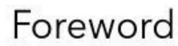
Mark Bradford

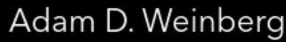
Omer Fast

A Ten-Year Celebration of The Bucksbaum Award, 2000–2010

Whitney Museum of American Art

Volume 1





Alice Pratt Brown Director,
Whitney Museum of
American Art

This publication marks the tenth anniversary of the Whitney Museum of American Art's Bucksbaum Award. The award, enthusiastically and generously established by longtime trustee Melva Bucksbaum, was instigated by former Whitney director Maxwell Anderson.

We are pleased to present this publication not only as a commemorative volume but also as a source book that, through interviews with each of the five Bucksbaum Award artists – Paul Pfeiffer, Irit Batsry, Raymond Pettibon, Mark Bradford, and Omer Fast – reveals aspects of their artistic process. This is appropriate, for the Bucksbaum Award not only recognizes accomplishment and excellence but also supports the artist's freedom to create future work. The award is not bestowed for best in show, for outstanding emerging artist, for need, or for lifetime achievement. It was conceived to encourage an artist who has previously produced a significant body of work, whose project for the Biennial is itself outstanding, and most important, whose future artistic contribution promises to be lasting. In other words, it acknowledges the full spectrum of production: past, present, and future work.

Given this, it is noteworthy that Bucksbaum and Anderson chose to call this honor an "award," not a "prize." The two words have very different connotations. The word *award* suggests merit and careful consideration, whereas the word *prize* calls to mind contest, competition, and the act of capturing. Even though it is doubtful that Anderson or Bucksbaum was thinking about specific definitions, in all likelihood they were aware that the Whitney Museum at its founding had a guiding principle, "No juries and no prizes." This was established to counter the rigid status quo imposed by the National Academy of Design on the exhibitions they organized at the turn of the twentieth century. At the time, juries served as gatekeepers, often keeping out new, progressive, and experimental work, while the exhibitions themselves served as little more than showcases for the prizewinners.

Now, almost a century after the Whitney's prize-free policy was established, the situation in the art world has considerably changed. A multitude of prizes are given in the visual arts – among them, the Turner Prize, the Wexner Prize, and the Golden Lion – but few are conceived as awards in recognition of process as well

as of excellence. In addition, few are so closely tied to the life of an institution: The Bucksbaum Award begins with a Whitney exhibition – one awardee is chosen from each Biennial – and leads to another exhibition at the Museum. Each artist is selected by a panel of curators – the curators of the Biennial, our chief curator, and three outside curators – plus the director. Because the selection is based on the breadth of accomplishment as well as the promise of an artist's work rather than the creation of a particular Biennial object, the discussions in the panels are wide-ranging, in-depth, and philosophical. This process provides the institution with a further opportunity to scrutinize the works in the Biennial with an eye to propelling the chosen artist forward through recognition, financial support, and the guarantee of a subsequent solo exhibition at the Whitney. In effect, the Bucksbaum Award opens up a road rather than determines a destination, reinforcing the Museum's mission "to support artists at critical moments in their careers." Moreover, it serves to link key artists with the Whitney, as the Biennial itself has done throughout its history. As Omer Fast says about the Biennial and the Bucksbaum Award, they each provide "a really nice way of connecting to the institution."

Reading the interviews in this publication, I am struck by the artists' vulnerability while engaged in the open-ended process of creating new work, as well as by their need to have unimpeded studio time and a place to show the finished work. As Mark Bradford says, "I work from security to insecurity in my studio. I have an hour of being very secure and then two hours of being very insecure. What makes me insecure is when I can't see where something is going." This necessary, desirable, but nonetheless difficult state of indeterminacy is also expressed by Omer Fast: "I have a hard time deciding. Any time I have an option, I'm always thinking, 'Well, what if?'" Similarly, Irit Batsry comments: "I just find myself somewhere, or there is a chain of events that unfolds in a certain way. It's very unusual for me to decide that I want to do this or that." And Raymond Pettibon confirms that this openness is critical, "You start with a blank mind and say, 'Okay, I'm going to do something that comes from me, because it's my art and my experience.'" While the Whitney Museum and Melva Bucksbaum take great pride in the artists chosen for the award, of equal satisfaction is what the award offers for each artist: financial freedom to make new work. As Paul Pfeiffer, winner of the first award, says, it "opened up possibilities for complex and ambitious work that have been evolving ever since." And, once all is said and done, that is the grand purpose of the Bucksbaum – to inspire and to support creation at the highest level.

Ten Years Later

Melva Bucksbaum

It was the fall of 1999, just after Maxwell Anderson was appointed director of the Whitney Museum of American Art. At the time, Max took it upon himself to have either a breakfast or a lunch with each of the Museum's trustees. At our breakfast together, he was enthusiastic about an idea he had for an award to be given to an artist showing in each Whitney Biennial. He said that he thought the award should be $100,000, in order to make a meaningful difference to the artist. As breakfast progressed, we discussed the parameters for such an award and how to determine who would best qualify from all of the gifted artists selected to participate in the Biennial. Ideally, the artist would have to be especially innovative, to reflect the creative impulse of the time, to have made a substantive body of work before exhibiting in the Biennial, and to have the potential of being an influence on his or her peers and thus help further the dialogue about contemporary art issues in the twenty-first century.

For about ten years, I too had been thinking about an award for an American artist – somewhat like the Pritzker Prize for architecture and the Turner Prize for contemporary art in London. So, as Max and I discussed this award, I leaned over the table and said, "Max, I think I can help you with this." By the 2000 Biennial, we had established an endowment for the award and set it in motion.

Now, ten years later, my family and I are thrilled with the results from the Bucksbaum Award. We are thrilled with the choices made by the jurors. We are thrilled that we can call these artists our friends. And most of all, we are thrilled that this award has allowed each artist, in some way, to continue to create with even greater commitment to his or her work. We congratulate each and every one of the artists, and we wish to thank Max Anderson, Adam Weinberg, and the many curators and jurors who have committed their time to making this award what it is today. Thank you, everyone, for your participation.

Melva Bucksbaum,
Bucksbaum Award
ceremony, April 29, 2008

Mark Bradford

Interview by
Carter E. Foster

2006
Mark Bradford
Born 1961, Los Angeles
Lives and works in Los Angeles

CARTER E. FOSTER: **I've been struck by your work ethic–what you learned from being a merchant and the way it applies to your practice–more than by the fact that you were a hairdresser.**
MARK BRADFORD: The work ethic came before my idea of being an artist. I learned from being a merchant that there was a beginning, middle, and end to every transaction, and that you had to see it all the way through. It wasn't necessarily that in the middle of it you understood the end result. Or that the end result had to always reflect the beginning of the transaction. But you knew that you had to move very succinctly through all of these different chapters.
CARTER E. FOSTER: **The idea of raw material is interesting in your work: how you go from using the raw material that you essentially excavate from the street and push it through a process of refining. That process is deeply engaged with the history of painting. Could you talk about those two things?**
MARK BRADFORD: The material that I cull from the streets is very about the body, the ways people move through space; it's about advertisements that reflect the needs of consumers, the services, the crises. But it always has to do with the body. Figuration has to do with the way we understand space, and the thing I understood really early on, probably through popular culture and especially through music of the last twenty years, is that South Central is a very figurative landscape. All over the world, people understand what South Central is, the way in which it's been packaged as being this gangster rap/crime/gangs/hip-hop place.

The second part of that question is that when I bring all of this social, hot, hot, hot material into my studio, my relationship with the history of painting and especially the history of abstraction begins. I think that the quote-unquote cooling it off or the reconfiguring or the dismantling is me abstracting that space–taking it from a body that's very inscribed and almost erasing the body and making another proposition: that it becomes part of the history of painting. I understand that some of these social details are going to cling to the edges of that sort of abstract painting. But it's my hope that it no longer belongs to the social space from which I culled the material, that it actually is inserted into the history of abstract painting, which is invariably where I want it to go. So it's starting with the body and having the body disappear . . .
CARTER E. FOSTER: **You've always been interested in exploring alternative materials. I'm curious about when you got this idea to excavate stuff from the street and use that.**
MARK BRADFORD: It happened very organically. For physical reasons, even when I was in school, I knew that I couldn't use oil paint because of the smell. The toxicness would always make me sick. Now, I might have kept with it, but also I'm very impatient. I work from security to insecurity in my studio. I have an hour of being very secure and then two hours of being very

The World Is Flat, 2007 (detail). Mixed-media collage on canvas, 101 ¼ × 143 ½ in. (257.2 × 364.5 cm). Collection of Rachel and Jean-Pierre Lehmann. © Mark Bradford

insecure. What makes me insecure is when I can't see where something is going. With oil paint, it's a slow process and that just didn't work. So I naturally shifted to using faster paint. You would talk to your professors, and they would say, "If you can't use oil paint, use acrylic paint." The strange thing about acrylic was that I didn't like the plasticness of it.

CARTER E. FOSTER: You can't really layer easily with acrylic, can you?

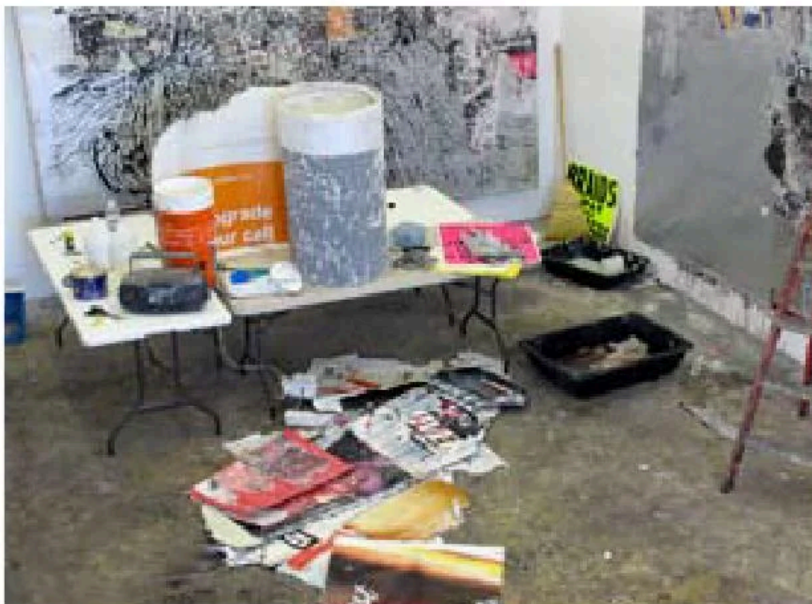
MARK BRADFORD: No. It's just simply one on top of another. And I thought, if acrylic is very unforgiving, then let's go to the ultimate. That's how I went to silkscreening. I liked this layer on top of layer. From there I went to thinking that paper was the most unforgiving material that you could possibly use – you lay one sheet down and if you cover it up with another sheet, there's absolutely no relationship to what was underneath. I don't like in-betweenness. I like either black or white. If it's totally not working, trash it.

CARTER E. FOSTER: Because if you make a mistake in paper, you can't fix it.

MARK BRADFORD: You've got to throw it out. Or you've got to cover it up. I was out of school, and I knew that I wanted to grapple with ideas of scale but I didn't have the money. The first paper I used was this sort of endpapers [used in hair treatment] because they were cheap, fifty cents a box. I was a hairdresser. This material had a social narrative attached to it. I was not secure; I was not ready to go right out of grad school and right into the history of abstraction. I felt like I wasn't ready to let go of my body. I had to ease into it. I've slowly become an abstract painter. I wasn't going to let someone determine – okay, you're done with the body. Wait a minute, I'll decide! And I'll decide very slowly what that means.

I was a hairstylist in South Central using products that came from a hair salon. And immediately, when that story caught on, what happened was that a body that was in transition almost got knocked back to being totally figurative. I was like, whoa, I was deconstructing my identity, and they slammed me back into this kind of heavy, heavy identity because of the materials that I chose to use.

CARTER E. FOSTER: The aspect of performance has been something that you've used in your video work. I'm thinking specifically of *Practice* [2003] and *Niagara* [2005] – one of them focuses on you, one of them on somebody



Top: Found materials in Bradford's studio, Los Angeles, 2007

Bottom: Video still from *Niagara*, 2005. Digital video, color, silent: 3:17 min. © Mark Bradford; courtesy Sikkema Jenkins and Co., New York

Opposite: *Dark and Lovely*, 2001. Mixed-media collage on canvas, 72 × 84 in. (182.9 × 213.4 cm). Collection of Nancy Delman Portnoy. © Mark Bradford

else. But it's very much about the body being inscribed in a particular type of space with rules and strictures. Do you see yourself continuing to work in that vein?

MARK BRADFORD: The paintings themselves are becoming more abstract. I see that if I want to talk about these social spaces or these identity spaces, that I actually just create works in those spaces. But it seems like the paintings and the video and performance work – they seem to be more separate materially.

CARTER E. FOSTER: You started making art at a time when you had had a fairly vast amount of life experience compared to most people, who might start when they're in their early twenties. You were in your thirties when you started going to both undergraduate and grad school?

MARK BRADFORD: I started school at thirty, and when I first got out, they would refer to me as "recently graduated." People would ask me, "How long have you been out of school?" I understood they were not taking into account anything that happened before I went to the ivory tower. But when I would speak about my work or my life, it became evident very quickly that I was talking about more than just six years of education at CalArts and then my career. It all commingled. The way I understood it was that you became a professional artist when you got a degree. So before that, I guess I was an unprofessional artist.

CARTER E. FOSTER: Didn't you model and live in Paris for a while and were a clubber for a long time?

MARK BRADFORD: Really, what I did was travel. I wasn't a model, I really was a clubber. It was in

Above: Video stills from *Practice*, 2003. Digital video, color, sound; 3 min. © Mark Bradford; courtesy Sikkema Jenkins and Co., New York

Opposite: Bradford working on *Bread and Circuses* in his studio, 2007

the 1980s and HIV was just ravishing everything, and I was twenty, twenty-one. I was seventeen years old when I heard that people were dying.

CARTER E. FOSTER: A bad time to come of age. I remember.

MARK BRADFORD: I came of age in the darkest period, or one of the darkest periods, of the twentieth century. It was so overwhelming to me. I did stumble through to being about nineteen years old after burying about 75 percent of the people that I knew. I didn't know how to deal with being full of youth and dealing with so much death. It was because of these two people battling so much in me that I decided I was just going to go on the road and have experiences in other countries.

CARTER E. FOSTER: Did getting away from this country help you gain perspective?

MARK BRADFORD: It helped me to get out of my microcosm. It helped me to see the world in a more global sense rather than this very small world that I was living in. So I'd travel, and I'd come back and work a little bit, and I'd travel and come back. I'd always come back to the hair salon and to whatever I was dealing with. I wouldn't stay away too long because I was very much connected to what was going on in my circle.

CARTER E. FOSTER: You have an unusual body—you're extremely tall—so you stand out. I assume that in that environment of the club, you always stood out. The way your body must have functioned for you then must have had an effect on your later art.

MARK BRADFORD: My body was this third thing, my body belonged to the public for comment. I attained 6 feet 8 inches when I was fifteen years old, and it's almost like I became two people. And I'm still very shy and awkward on the inside, but when you're 6 foot 8 you simply have to learn how to live in a 6-foot-8 body. I wanted to live in the 6-foot-8 body well. I didn't want to live in the 6-foot-8 body not well.

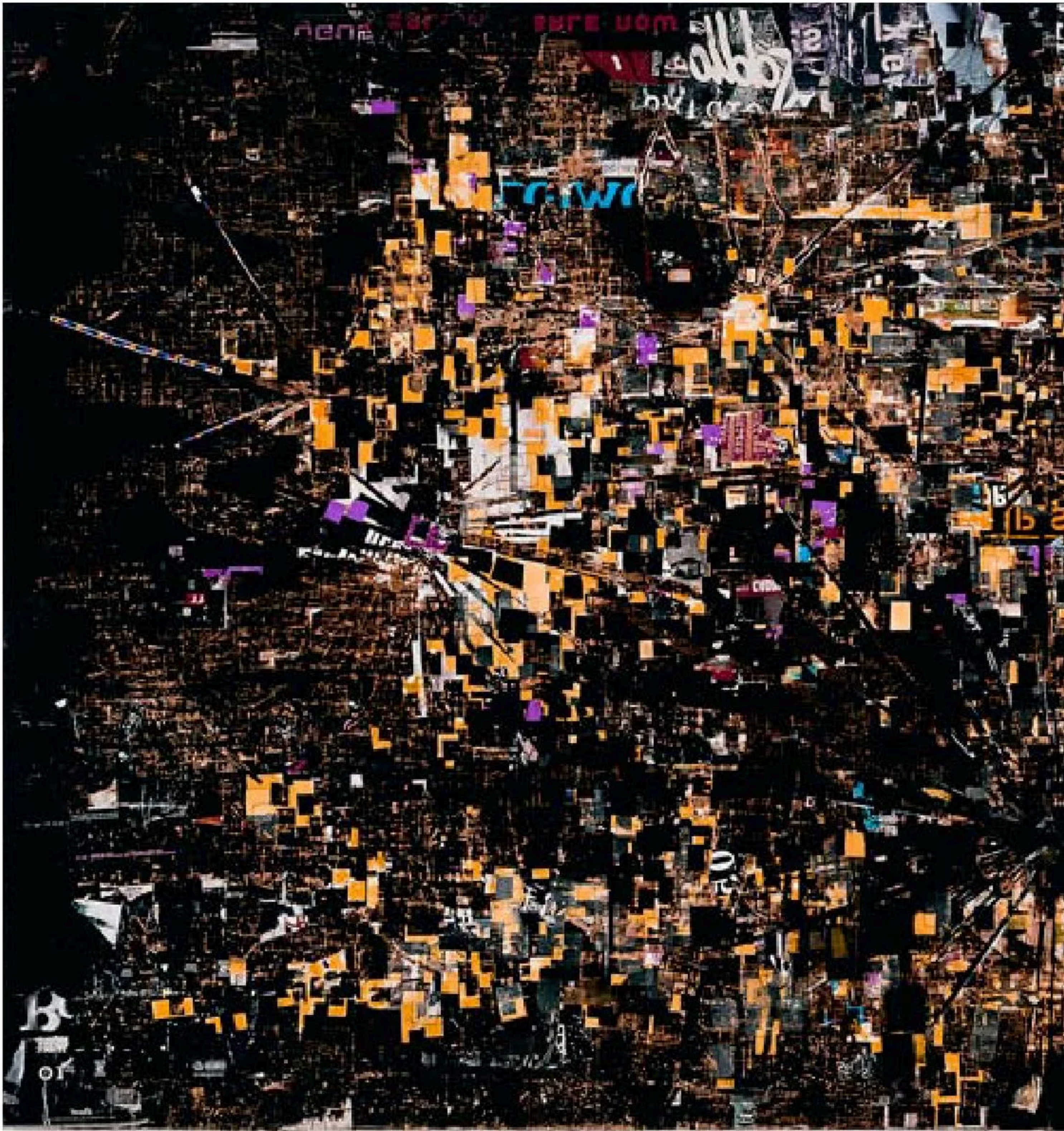
CARTER E. FOSTER: Do you feel like when you're making work and you're in a good groove with it, that your body's in sync with the material you're using?

MARK BRADFORD: I'm comfortable with scale because what would be considered a large work for someone else would be not as large for me because my scale is just a little bit different. I don't get lost in it; I know how to move through it. It's not a heroic-size painting to me. Just the idea that bigger is better (and even I just used the word *heroic*) is funny, though, because I don't feel any of that stuff. I walk down the street and I really wish I could disappear. People come up to me saying, "How tall are you?" and I answer, and then: "Well, that's good, it's good to be tall." Sometimes I don't know what people are looking for when they're looking at me. I see the look in their eye, but I don't know what it is that they're looking for. It's almost like I feel like I'm disappointing them.

CARTER E. FOSTER: But then you go back to making art, and I suppose you can disappear in that to some degree.

MARK BRADFORD: Absolutely. And that's probably why I love being an abstract painter. It took me a while to even want to make a large painting. It's sort of taking up more space, you know.

CARTER E. FOSTER: One of the largest paintings you've made, which was a breakthrough for me in understanding your work, was the



painting in the 2006 Whitney Biennial, *Los Moscos* [2004].

MARK BRADFORD: Yeah, that *was* a breakthrough painting. That was when I allowed myself to really deal with scale and to make a large painting. The idea of a large painting historically was significant: what they've been made to be, what it means to make a large painting, and who was allowed to make one.

CARTER E. FOSTER: The title refers to the migrant workers in Los Angeles, and people read the imagery as a kind of city at night/maplike image. Did you know you wanted to make a painting that was about a particular subculture of Los Angeles? Or did that come after?

MARK BRADFORD: No, it all happened at the same time. I think that in some ways "Los Moscos" [the flies] is a derogatory term. The idea of these invisible/visible bodies. And in many ways, I felt like that.

CARTER E. FOSTER: It's a very impressive painting spatially. It has that quality that's so important for the history of modern painting from the nineteenth century on, which is both this opened-up, expansive space as well as the individual marks that are flat things on the surface. For anyone who's been to Los Angeles, it feels like Los Angeles. Are you comfortable with the work being read that way?

MARK BRADFORD: Oh, I don't care. The funny thing is that in talking with you, I realized how much I have a relationship to what I can and can't control. I know that when I'm doing a piece of work, what I can control is what happens in the studio. As soon as it leaves my studio, I can't control that. When I'm reading about my work, I can be very removed.

CARTER E. FOSTER: Another large-scale work you did that was on view at the Whitney and part of the Bucksbaum Award exhibition was *Bread and Circuses* [2007]. Is this the first painting you did in this technique where you embed string between the layers of paper

Los Moscos, 2004.
Mixed-media collage on canvas, 125 × 190 ½ in. (317.5 × 483.9 cm).
Tate, London; lent by the American Fund for the Tate Gallery and the American Acquisitions Committee 2006. © Mark Bradford; courtesy Sikkema Jenkins and Co., New York

and then sand back through? That seems to me like another breakthrough, because you found a new process that allowed you to do different things.

MARK BRADFORD: For me it's all about mark making. I knew that I wanted to continue to challenge myself with how to make a mark. I wanted to find a stand-in for my mark, a stand-in for a piece of chalk or a graphite pencil or the way I make a mark with my hand. So I wanted to find another way to do that, and I was reading something about Duchamp and his drop-string pieces. I thought, well, that actually is a mark that he made.

CARTER E. FOSTER: It's a found mark, essentially.

MARK BRADFORD: Yeah. So I actually initially did lay the canvas on the ground and drop the string, but that didn't work. I said, well, I can't do that. But what I can do – and is it really a found mark? because Duchamp is dropping it – so I thought, what I can do is that I can actually go and trace my own tracing, putting a mark down and then going back over it with the string. And it removed it from the first action. So I thought: that's interesting, that starts to open it up. Because you never can get it perfect. The first expressionistic gesture is just that one expressionistic gesture, which is what the Abstract Expressionists were after – that's what that was all about, these kinds of emotive gestures. I don't really believe so much in the emotive gesture. Why don't I believe in the emotive gesture? I believe that emotive gesture is a drag.

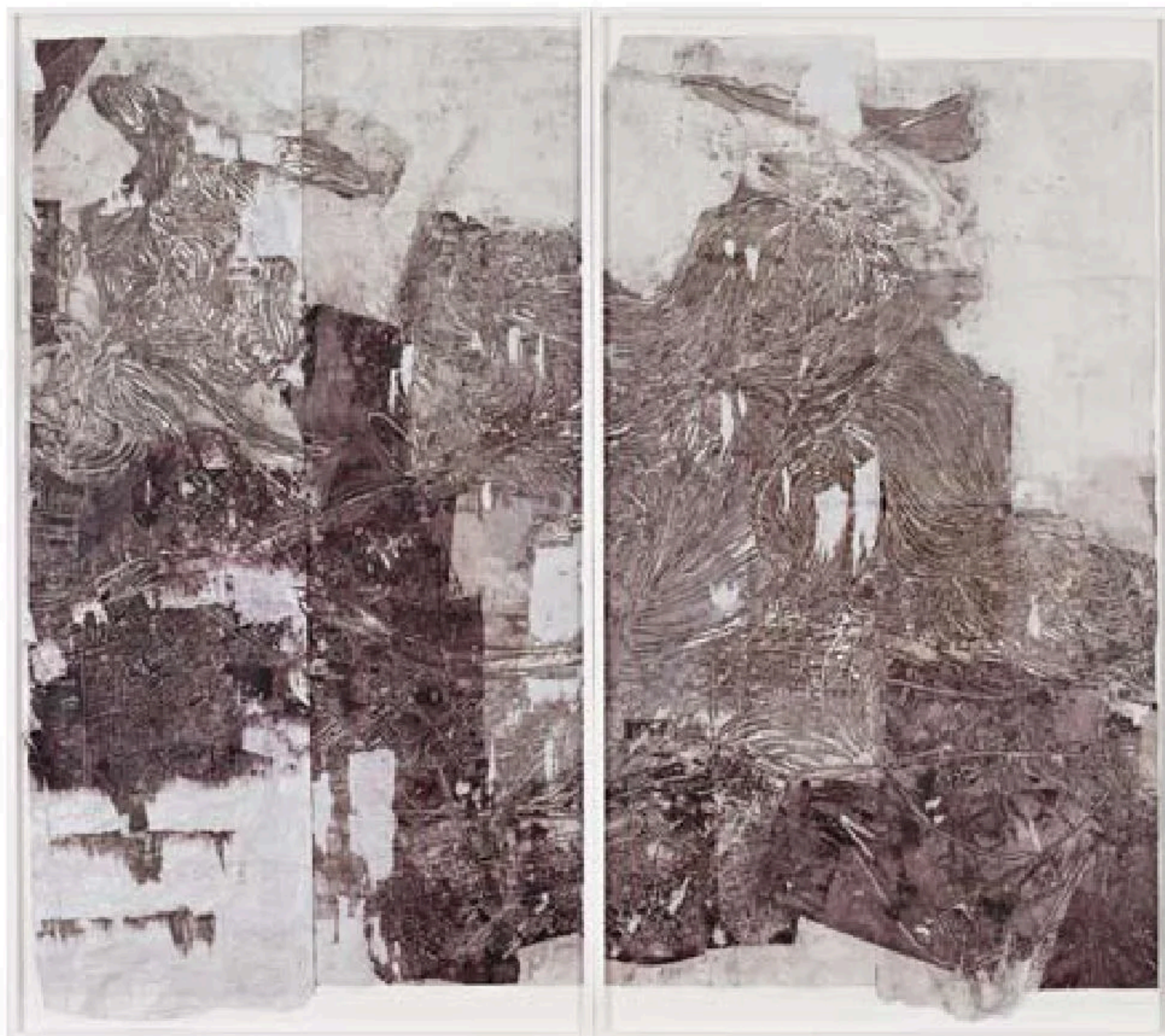
CARTER E. FOSTER: Is a drag?

MARK BRADFORD: A drag for the way in which expressionism has been coded in sort of art language. To be emotional, you use red. Am I making sense?

CARTER E. FOSTER: Yeah. It's also maybe about the masculine performance, the macho aspect of the expressionist mark.

MARK BRADFORD: I don't believe it. Just because you take a big brush and swing it doesn't mean you're more emotional or more intense or more – more.

Bread and Circuses, 2007. Mixed-media collage on canvas, 133 × 253 in. (337.8 × 642.6 cm). Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; purchase, with funds from Patrick and Mary Scanlan 2008.42. © Mark Bradford



Above: *Untitled*, 2008. Mixed media on two sheets of paper, 89 ½ × 102 ¼ in. (227.3 × 259.7 cm) overall. Collection of Marion and Nash Flores. © Mark Bradford

Opposite, top: Installation view, *Neither New nor Correct: New Work by Mark Bradford*, Whitney Museum of American Art, 2007. Left to right: *The World Is Flat*, 2007; *Bread and Circuses*, 2007. © Mark Bradford

Opposite, bottom: Installation view, *Neither New nor Correct: New Work by Mark Bradford*, Whitney Museum of American Art, 2007. Left to right: *Bread and Circuses*, 2007; *Noah's Third Day*, 2007. © Mark Bradford

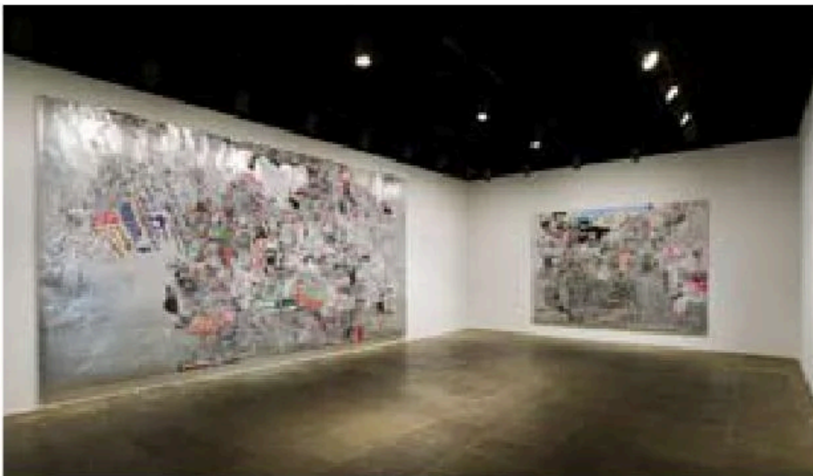
CARTER E. FOSTER: But there is a kind of . . . I wouldn't say violence, but when you sand back through these surfaces, there's a ripping going on and there is a force there. But it's a totally different kind of thing.

MARK BRADFORD: Which I absolutely like. I'm always trying to get to things that pulsate with the possibility of violence, with the possibility of this kind of emotional landscape. But it pulsates just behind the surface. It's like ten minutes before a riot, that space – that's what I like. Right before something happens. So I try to build the work to that pitch.

CARTER E. FOSTER: I was really impressed in your last show with a work that I believe one might call a monoprint [*Untitled*, 2008]. It seemed to have been derived from one

of your string sanded pieces. Do you know what I'm talking about?

MARK BRADFORD: Actually, it *is* a monoprint. I built up a surface, and I used this very inky black paper as the first layer. So I built up this surface with the lines and the ridges and all the stuff that I do, and I put this inky paper over and covered it up, so it looked like a wood carving. I covered up the whole painting with the silver



paper, and that was going to be the second layer. But when I was rolling it with a wallpaper roller, to flatten it out, the roller caught the silver paper and flipped it backwards. I'd been working for about three hours on this application of silver paper, and so the staining from the black paper onto the back of the silver paper was so beautiful that I ended up taking all of it off. Just lifted it up. And it's a monoprint. Absolutely beautiful. I would love to do a whole show of those.

CARTER E. FOSTER: I was so impressed by the experimentation in that work, the scale and the delicacy of it, but also by how it really did have this connection back to the history of art. But it's interesting that you got there through your own experimentation.

MARK BRADFORD: What I'm realizing about myself is that on one side I'm very formal, a real formalist. But I refuse to use formal techniques. I've got to use these eccentric techniques to get to this formal end place. I'm this crazy kind of nutty professor in my studio, thinking up stuff and inventing stuff and then applying them in a way that in the end looks like a very formal painting. That impulse is very old. It was why I wanted to paint and started looking to endpapers, looking to string, looking to joint compound from Home Depot, looking for all these things because I had this eccentricness. I like to brew strange concoctions and have them blow up in my face.

CARTER E. FOSTER: Alchemy is a great metaphor for painting. It always has been.

MARK BRADFORD: Yeah, it is. It's alchemy. I love that, yeah.

CARTER E. FOSTER: If you take your career from when you first started showing in LA and New York to now, it hasn't been that many years. And in that amount of time, you've won the Bucksbaum Award and you recently got a MacArthur and find yourself in this position of being a really well-known artist suddenly. Has it been a wild ride?

MARK BRADFORD: To be honest with you, my *life* has been a wild ride. As a matter of fact, I would say this is probably one of my more easygoing periods. It's been great. Winning an award such as the Bucksbaum gives emerging artists a vote of confidence from their peer group. Artists will continue to do what they do, but oftentimes we feel isolated, and peer acknowledgment can be a catalyst for artistic growth . . .

Omer Fast

Interview by
Tina Kukielski

2008
Omer Fast
Born 1972, Jerusalem
Lives and works in Berlin

TINA KUKIELSKI: We are standing here in the Whitney's installation of your most recent work, *Nostalgia* [2009]. Over the past several years, you have been using the interview as a central motif in your work. The narratives you have chosen to explore build on personal experiences, sometimes anecdotes or remembrances from the recent past. In this instance, you are dealing with a story you were told by a Nigerian asylum seeker, which took place in London in 2009. *Nostalgia* uses that interview as a jumping-off point. The work is arranged in three parts in three separate spaces at three different points in time, unfolding across a series of discontinuous events and exchanges between characters. Beyond that 2009 interview, you also told me that there was a literary influence for the project, a book by Georges Perec?

OMER FAST: There were two books that I was interested in while thinking about the project. One book that I had read beforehand, and that I knew was important for me, was Aleksandar Hemon's *Lazarus Project*. And the other book, which was suggested to me, was Georges Perec's *W, or The Memory of Childhood*.

These two books are very similar in that they both alternate from one story to another, so chapter one is about one thing, chapter two is about another thing. And it goes back and forth, developing two narrative strands at the same time. What they're also doing is taking the format of a memoir and weaving it alongside a fictional tale.

In the case of Perec, it's very much about a traumatic memory and absence. Perec grew up in France and lost a father in World War II and had relatives deported. He was sent to the mountains, where he spent the war years in sort of idyllic, happy circumstances. But, of course, his mother was also murdered during this time. His book is constructed so that, in the absence of a memory for this trauma, it gives you these little window views, little snapshots, of the life that he's had or that he can remember having in those mountains, almost like memories from an Alpine camp, as banal and beautiful as that sounds.

And then they alternate with an almost do-it-yourself mythology that details the history of a place called W—a fictional island in South America where there's a community that has its own strange, sadistic rules. And so you have these two portraits that are intertwined in the book. At some point while making *Nostalgia*, I was reading both of these books and poaching them, I suppose, for ideas and also for inspiration.

TINA KUKIELSKI: This interweaving of two stories into one tale is certainly a motif in your work. You used a similar approach in *The Casting* [2007] by cutting together two discrete stories told by a U.S. Army sergeant. I think originally your idea for *Nostalgia* was to make two films, and it ended up morphing into three. Did that duality sort of break apart, or do you feel that it's preserved in *Nostalgia*?

Production still from *Nostalgia III*, 2009.
© Omer Fast; courtesy gb agency, Paris; Postmasters, New York; and Arratia, Beer, Berlin

OMER FAST: It probably got refracted – broken – and this happens very often. The reason for that is almost a personal confession: I have a hard time deciding. Any time I have an option, I'm always thinking, "Well, what if." And it's almost an infantile way of thinking about things – basically, "No, not this. The opposite." That's what my daughter does now: everything that I suggest to her, I get back a "no." So I'm still caught up, I guess, in that two-year-old way of thinking about things; as soon as something suggests itself, its opposite comes up also.

A lot of what I do as an artist is try to reconcile – and maybe *reconcile* is not the right word – try to simultaneously explore both options. Very often the projects do take on this kind of hybrid form, and I've started to relax about this and accept that this is a way of thinking. It's not dialectics, but rather something that tries to look at a subject or a story from several different viewpoints at the same time.

TINA KUKIELSKI: That segues into a discussion about time, because it seems that you further fracture *Nostalgia* through your multifarious approach to time – time of the past, time of the present, and time of the future.

OMER FAST: *Nostalgia* is very much an example of that. You have an individual recall something about his life, and so the work is, from the start, retrospective. It's in the past tense, and it's a memory, and it's addressing a time that's already past.

Having said that, since I'm using a camera, and since I'm recording a voice and speaking to a person, there's obviously also the time of storytelling, the time of the interview, the time that exists when a person is just telling his story, and where I get a chance to interject and also to play a role in the development of that story.

So for me – and this is the case for every work that's narrative-based – there is the time that's addressed by the work, which is almost a literary time, a recollected time. There's the time that is articulated through the kind of recording equipment I use – the camera, or in this case, this little recording device. And that captures another slice of time. And then when you sit and you edit, you're making decisions that impact both of those stories, but you're also imposing, almost, another sense of time over those two layers.

TINA KUKIELSKI: Right – editing time.

OMER FAST: What, for me, makes the work kind of rich and complex and rewarding is the fact

that these three narrative strands, these three layers of time, very often begin to break in on each other in ways that pass information from one layer of time to the other.

TINA KUKIELSKI: **I'm interested in the first part of *Nostalgia* – the fragment of the interview – and how that original interview morphed in your mind into the second part, which was a script that you wrote partly from the original transcript, partly from memory, and partly invented.**

Opposite: Video stills from *Nostalgia I*, 2009. High-definition video, color, sound: 4:35 min., looped. © Omer Fast; courtesy gb agency, Paris; Postmasters, New York; and Arratia, Beer, Berlin

Above: Installation view, *Omer Fast: Nostalgia*, Whitney Museum of American Art, 2009. Collection of the artist. © Omer Fast

OMER FAST: What happened with this particular piece is that I had talked to several people, and the more I talked to them, the more I realized that I had to stop what I was doing, to change what I was doing, because it was terrible. It was awful. It was unethical. It was a horrible, terrible, awful thing to do to people.

TINA KUKIELSKI: **And the people you're referring to specifically were the refugees?**

OMER FAST: Well, I was talking to several people. I was talking to refugees, asylum seekers, and I was also talking to people who helped them in London.

TINA KUKIELSKI: **Caseworkers?**

OMER FAST: They're not necessarily caseworkers. They're often either volunteers or people whose job it is to help migrants. And out of these conversations, I realized that there were some things that made me leery, a little bit . . . wary.

One of them was the way that my project, my desire, as an artist, dovetailed with the project and the desire of the caseworker, who represents the state and the state's power.

So in my desire to pull these peoples' stories from obscurity and to authenticate their stories and to get at all the stuff that you need when you're writing a piece of fiction in order to pull it away from it being a cliché, on the one hand—stuff that you read about in the news—and on the other hand to keep it from being just a schematic outline that you can dismiss as a fabrication. You want detail, you want to know what color it was, what the voice was like, describe the dark to me, all these kinds of things.

TINA KUKIELSKI: Yes, like a journalist. But you're saying that you think that the caseworkers were similarly trying to pull out these threads in order to create their own narratives?

OMER FAST: In order to authenticate a person's story and to figure out whether the request for asylum has merit, there is this kind of truth operation that's all about extracting details. Of course, I'm not there to figure out whether these peoples' stories are true or not. But nevertheless, I became more aware of how my project was, in some respects, very much like what I imagined the project of the home office or the INS to be.

TINA KUKIELSKI: In the second part of *Nostalgia*, you make reference to that: there is a moment when the interviewer, the actor who is playing you, is obviously uncomfortable. And I think that occurs when the refugee asks if he's ever been to Africa.

OMER FAST: Right.

TINA KUKIELSKI: I think that is you making a point about your own possible discomfort in that original moment. But it's also a point at which the tables are being turned in an interesting and surprising way. It foreshadows the role reversal in the third and final part.

Video stills from *Nostalgia II*, 2009. Two-channel high-definition video, color, sound: 9:49 min., looped. © Omer Fast; courtesy gb agency, Paris; Postmasters, New York; and Arratia, Beer, Berlin

OMER FAST: Sure, sure. This also allows humor to enter the story, and this is something that's important to me, not just as a way of sublimating that kind of tension but as a phenomenon that accompanies the tension. There is a possibility for humor to enter, especially when the tables are turned.

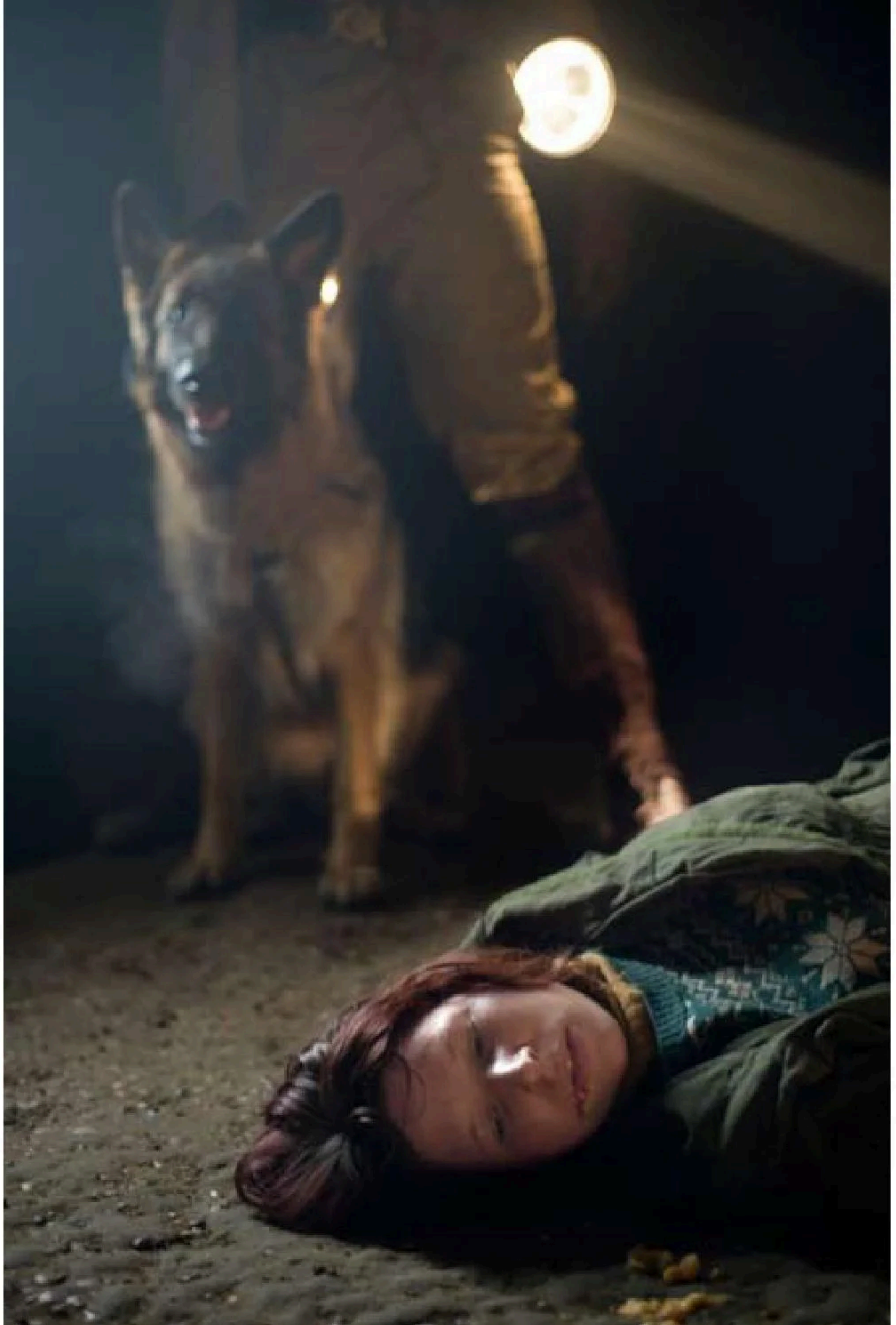
For me, the process is very much fictional from the start. The research that I do is not empirical research; it is much more about artistic subjectivity as a prism or foil for the real. So it's a lot to balance. There is a political, ethical dimension to it, but very often that slips and gives way to a subjective, playful, paranoid, worried dimension. And these exist for me very much as narrative elements.

TINA KUKIELSKI: Let's talk a bit about the final section of *Nostalgia*, which is the 30-minute film that becomes a narrative in and of itself. I feel comfortable with the temporal displacement manifest in the 1970s aesthetic that is projected into some postapocalyptic future, but I struggle to situate the film geographically. Can you talk about where you see this colony?

OMER FAST: You mean literally, on the map? I have no idea. I mean, the whole colony exists as a suggestion. It's obviously borrowed from notions of gated communities, walled communities, walled countries . . . And at the same time, it is playing with a notion of Africa and Africanization that is clearly a kind of fantasy and projection. I mean, there is nothing in the piece that situates it comfortably in the Niger Delta or in the Congo or any of the other places that were the context for the stories that I originally collected.

There is a sense of an imagined geography. The exchange between the so-called caseworker and the English refugee, when they talk about riding bicycles across the Mediterranean, is very much part of the science fiction genre. That is also a hot border region where a lot of human trafficking takes place.

There is, in the piece, a very loose and very fluid sense of place and geography. There are tunnels. There are interior shots. There is no outside. The most physical aspects of the film, I think, are given expression in underground situations. People are doing everything



underground – they're watching films, they're receiving some sort of sustenance, they're eating underground. They're obviously able to escape and to be caught and eventually to be executed underground. But it seems like the community aboveground regenerates itself through all these activities happening underneath it, and this is a very palpable psychological metaphor.

TINA KUKIELSKI: In the underground is also where this idea of entrapment is really taken to its extreme. So maybe we can talk a little bit about the metaphor of the trap, which is obviously crucial to the entire meaning.

OMER FAST: I think the literal traps that are set up, and then sprung, they're the ones that occur underground, and they're the easy kind of traps. And then what happens aboveground is the sustenance that the community derives from these migrants – namely, this rather dry set of instructions for how to build a trap that the migrants surrender to the community and that becomes part of what that community compulsively talks about, passing it along, repeating it. I think the sense of entrapment is therefore inevitably much richer aboveground and much more difficult to pin down.

These people are compelled to hear the story, to repeat it verbatim, but also to attach it to their own unresolved impulses and desires from the past, things that they aren't able to achieve on

Production stills from *Nostalgia III*, 2009. © Omer Fast; courtesy gb agency, Paris; Postmasters, New York; and Arratia, Beer, Berlin

their own. They need that story in order to sustain themselves. And at the same time, this notion of sustenance, this notion of literally feeding on another in order to make sense of oneself is demonstrated to be something that entraps the community. It still puts the community in a very ambivalent relationship vis-à-vis the figure of the migrant, who, although trapped by the state, by the police, by the interviewer is nevertheless able to import something new into the community, and the community cannot generate new stories, only recycle them.

TINA KUKIELSKI: **Can you think of an example from your own life of a narrative thread that's been passed down through one source or another—maybe it was on television, maybe it was something you've read, or maybe a family anecdote—that helps you uncover parts of yourself?**

OMER FAST: I grew up with the story of a Polish grandfather who was able to buy his freedom by putting a diamond into a hollow tooth that he had. And so for me, hearing this story over and over and over again, growing up . . . The story represented a sort of two-year-old's fantasy, very anal. What happens if the diamond, which is this very hard substance that kind of captures light inside it, instead of buying your freedom becomes part of your bio . . . you know . . .

TINA KUKIELSKI: **Chemistry?**

OMER FAST: Right, it becomes part of your biological pathways to the extent that both story and substance, memory and time are trapped in the guts of the storyteller. And so eventually the storyteller must shit, or the constipation will be so, so, so severe that he or she will require hospitalization. And so the notion of escape through excretion, the notion of escape through expulsion, is something that accompanies, I think, a lot of my narratives.

And *excretion* and *expulsion*, you know, they're very rich, loaded words. They don't have

Video stills from *Nostalgia III*, 2009. Super 16mm film transferred to high-definition video, color, sound: 32:48 min., looped. © Omer Fast; courtesy gb agency, Paris; Postmasters, New York; and Arratia, Beer, Berlin

to be just gastric. They don't all have to emanate from the colon. If you look at community as a cesspool, if you look at community as plumbing or as a series of pathways and pipes and tunnels, then of course you start to find different ways of articulating that figuratively, metaphorically.

So all this is to say that the impetus or desire, the kind of energy behind this, is a very, very infantile, you know, anal and oral repressed sort of thing.

TINA KUKIELSKI: One more question, about the Bucksbaum Award, which you were given exactly a year ago. It came with a $100,000 award; did that help you to realize the new project?

OMER FAST: Absolutely.

TINA KUKIELSKI: Or maybe a bigger question: How has your recognition as an artist changed in the past year, or two years?

OMER FAST: I think the nice thing that the award does is – it gives you a really nice way of connecting to the institution. Because here I am again at the Whitney, showing another project in a solo show, and it's a wonderful, wonderful opportunity, even beyond all the money and whatnot. This is really the nice thing, I think, that comes along with the award.

And, in a sense, to get that award and to know that the show is coming up afterward gives you the thing that you need, which is an alibi to create, to crawl out of your tunnel and go play. But also to not worry about where that project is going to be shown, because you know that you have this kind of guaranteed relationship with the institution, regardless of whether the curators want to see you again.

Of course, the upside or the downside is that you don't enter the institution in the normal way, where a curator follows your work for several years and you have an engagement and you know that you're there for the right reasons. In a way, it's like being smuggled into the institution, which is a really, really nice, subversive way for an award to work. And awards are not usually subversive. The Bucksbaum was not necessarily conceived as a subversive award, but it does allow you to exist in an extra-institutional way with the institution. And I think that's a really nice thing for an award to do.