

# Piece by piece, important visual arts event Venice Biennale feels closer and closer to Denver

By Ray Mark Rinaldi · May 28, 2017, 12:01 am

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Mark Bradford, Butch Queen, 2016. Mixed media on canvas; 104 1/4 x 144 1/2 inches. (Provided by the Denver Art Museum)

The Venice Biennale is arguably the most important visual arts event on the planet, but it's always felt a bit distant from Denver. We watch from afar to see who might emerge as a new art-world star from the exhibits that different countries produce every two years on-site, though not many of us travel the 5,000 miles to experience the event.

This year, there are a few interesting reasons to feel closer. The Denver Art Museum, coincidentally, has a major exhibit of paintings by Mark Bradford, who won the vaulted spot of representing the United States at its pavilion in Venice this time around, and Denver's Clyfford Still Museum next door has a partner show curated by Bradford.

At the same time, two Denver artists, Laura Shill and Joel Swanson, are getting their own chance to show in Venice, thanks to Denver's Black Cube nomadic art museum, which is sponsoring an exhibit of their work, called "Personal Structures," at one of the Biennale's well-attended satellite sites. It's a high visibility moment for the artists and our city.

And it's getting noticed, at least by the respected online publication Artnet, which has been doing aggressive coverage of the Biennale this year and whose review of "Personal Structures" refers to our state, tongue-and-cheek, as "the latest nation to join the Venice Biennale." The piece goes on to say nice things about both artists' work and calls out the effort as "an ambassador for an unexpected global art community: Colorado."

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That level of recognition was the hope when Black Cube decided to stake a claim in the middle of contemporary art's splashiest event — and spend the tens of thousands of dollars it cost to assume a few rooms in Venice's historic Palazzo Bembo exhibition space.

Black Cube, which was founded and funded by Denver philanthropist and artist Laura Merage, has been around for about two years now and has built a reputation by creating pop-up exhibits across the Front Range and in a few spots across the country. The nonprofit organization rejects the idea of permanent space and its mission is to help promising artists take their work to the next level. Chief curator Cortney Lane Stell describes it as a "borderless institution that kind of picks up and moves wherever our artists' ideas lead."

For Shill and Swanson, an appearance in Venice as crowds swamp the city is certainly a career booster, but both are ready. They've each conquered Colorado's own institutional visual arts mountain with solo shows at the Museum of Contemporary Art Denver.

They're in fine and familiar form in Italy, as photos of the exhibit show. Swanson, who often works with words and letters, has two offerings in the mix, "S/HE" and "T/HERE," both text pieces made of neon. The "S" and the "T" at the front of each piece flicker on and off, de-solidifying notions of gender and geographic identity.

Shill's installation centers on a large-scale curtain made of gold spandex. It is titled "Trophy Wall" and opens to reveal shapes that call to mind male and/or female genitalia. As with Swanson's piece, gender gets a bit confused — viewers can't quite pin things down. Both

artists' work is on the showy side — Shill's shimmers under its lights and Swanson's actually lights up. If your intent is to make a splash in a foreign land, these materials work in your favor.

The logistics of putting the show together were complicated, to say the least. Shill had to ship her work from Denver, get it through customs and set it up at the Palazzo Bembo. Swanson's work was fabricated in Italy to avoid any technical issues on-site, which meant working with unfamiliar craftsman in an unfamiliar language.

But it's a qualified success for Black Cube, a pay-off for some genuine ambition in service of Denver and its artists, and an incentive for future ambitious moves, Stell said. "I think it will be a building narrative over the duration of Black Cube's existence of constantly showing up at the table and showing our work is up to par."

The exhibit continues through Sept. 14, which means there is still time to go see it.

As for Bradford's paintings in Denver, they're a different show than his Italian effort. There, he has turned the entire U.S. pavilion into an installation filled with both flat, wall-hung works and three-dimensional objects. The work turns the American building, modeled after Thomas Jefferson's Monticello, into an architectural ruin and it has been widely hailed in critical reviews — which nearly all point out that Bradford is both black and gay — as an effective protest piece against the Trump administration's lack of empathy for the plights of artists and minorities.

It is a star turn that seals Bradford's reputation as one of the most important American artists of the current era, an idea reflected by the fact that a single painting of his can now command more than \$4 million on the market.

No doubt, it is a coup for Denver to have a display of Bradford's work at the biggest moment of his career, an event made possible by the fact that Bradford, 55, often credits Clyfford Still as one of his biggest influences. The deal for having him here included an offer that allowed him to curate a few rooms at our Clyfford Still Museum to show how Still's work impacted his own.

The two exhibits go under one name, "Shade: Clyfford Still/Mark Bradford," and both are timely — and certainly impressive — glimpses into Bradford's creative powers, as well as his methods, which involve manipulating paper to construct abstract objects. As Bradford explains in a video accompanying the exhibit "I use a painter's vocabulary; i just don't use paint."

So, while the work hangs on the wall, it is full of texture, thousands of tiny creases of paper that are bunched, sanded, folded and overlaid upon flat surfaces. They are dramatic assemblages, abstract for sure, though at times teasing toward representation.



Joel Swanson and Laura Shill at their Black Cube exhibit in Venice. (Provided by Black Cube)

The show's signature pieces — probably “Realness” and “Butch Queen” — have him working in a palette heavy with gold and black. As the titles imply, Bradford is attempting to put ideas of identity before us, imbuing abstraction, as he puts it in that video, “with policy and political and gender and race and sexuality.” They are complicated works, simultaneously attractive and unpleasant, groundbreaking, and good examples of why no one can stop staring at his creations at this particularly sensitive time in history.

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Bradford gets more literal in both his titles and his objects with pieces like “Mississippi Goddam,” a piece about the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. His imagery remains mysterious, but you can see in his manipulation of paper what appears to be actual waves inundating the view. The waves, and the entire work for that matter, are consuming, overwhelming.

The black that Bradford employs in his work is not without serious symbolic thought about his own “blackness” and the complications of race in the United States. It is also his main link to Clyfford Still, who employed the color frequently in his own paintings.

You can see the connection clearly in the Bradford-curated show at the Clyfford Still Museum (see it second). Still's work is always a bit of a puzzle (he didn't talk all that much about it), but Bradford's picks from the collection make a sound suggestion that Still, too, had race in mind as he painted. Much of his work — he lived from 1904 to 1980 — was developed during a period of heightened awareness of race relations in the country.

It's a clever move, pairing the two shows, and gets around the Clyfford Still Museum's charter rules against showing any artist other than Still at his namesake museum. The combo also allows visitors a good value: Pay admission at one institution and you can get into the other for free.

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