’The show isn’t just about AIDS. It’s about the body and how the body and health can be political.’

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“Finding Barry,” Mark Bradford (2015). Numbers represent the estimated adults and adolescents diagnosed with AIDS (per 100,000) in each U.S. state in 2009.Courtesy the artist and Hauser & Wirth. Photo by Joshua White.

Mark Bradford’s exhibition Scorched Earth at the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles in part considers the immediacy and history of the ongoing HIV/AIDS epidemic through the language of abstraction. Bradford’s large-scale excavated wall painting, “Finding Barry” (above), is a map of the United States that includes numbers representing the estimated adults and adolescents diagnosed with AIDS (per 100,000) in each U.S. state in 2009. The exhibition also includes a suite of abstract paintings based on AIDS cells under a microscope. Below, Visual AIDS interviews Bradford about the exhibition and his relationship to the 1980/’90s moment when AIDS ravaged multiple communities, including those in Bradford’s hometown of Los Angeles.

Can you describe the process for creating “Finding Barry”? In what ways does the representation speak to the “power of information, the urgency of activism, and the danger of forgetting cultural trauma” as articulated in the exhibition’s wall labels? And why 2009?
I have always loved maps, and “Finding Barry” was created by excavating into the Hammer project wall to reveal what was underneath, all the projects which came before. The work touches on all the subjects you mention. It also comes out of my thinking about the recent hysteria about the Ebola virus and how familiar that felt to some of the hysteria around AIDS in the 1980s. 2009 was the year of the statistics I found.

Many of the paintings included in the exhibition are based on abstracted representations of AIDS cells as seen under microscopes. How does this process, which you describe as “social abstraction,” allow you to both speak to particular social or political contexts while also transcending them? And why were you drawn to AIDS cells in particular?
I like the idea of biology being a map, and in thinking about this show I was looking at cells being infected by the HIV virus. For me that has a lot of social references I find fascinating. The show isn’t just about AIDS. It’s about the body and how the body and health can be political. AIDS and Ebola somehow in a social context become much more than just biology. That transformation fascinates me.

The thought-provoking reader that accompanies the exhibition features republications of seminal texts from writers and cultural critics including Douglas Crimp, Marlon Riggs and José Esteban Muñoz. How does including these perspectives provide a context from which your work is created and broaden reference points for understandings of your practice?
All of those works talk about some of the same issues I am pointing to in the Hammer show. They just provide a broader context. They are all also writers and ideas I admire.

The Scorched Earth reader also features a compelling section in which images of AIDS activism during the 1980s are paired with more recent images from the Ebola outbreak. Can you touch on the thought process behind this arrangement?
The discussions, debates and news coverage around the Ebola virus felt so familiar to me, right down to the idea of banning flights from Africa!

How did/does the cultural impact of the HIV seroconversion of prominent cultural icons such as Eazy E and Magic Johnson play a role in discussions and tropes of masuclinity and race that you tease out in your performative works such as “Spiderman”?
“Spiderman” came right out of those discussions. I wanted to take a familiar idea and turn it inside out. It’s just another way of dealing with the same issues but from a totally different perspective. It was so much fun to create that piece and to take that character through so many of the crazy ideas we have as a society. The piece is all about how AIDS and HIV had different meanings depending on who had it. Those social differences fascinate me.

In what ways does your newly co-founded organization Art + Practice in Leimert Park, Los Angeles, which “creates an educational platform that supports the acquisition of practical skills for foster youth and stresses the cultural importance of art within a larger social context,” relate to the more

abstract ways that larger social contexts are embedded in your art-making practice?
To me it’s all about social context. Both in the studio and with Art + Practice, I am always interested in the same ideas of how to engage and shift the discussion.

Mark Bradford was born in 1961 in Los Angeles, California, where he lives and works. In 1997 Bradford graduated with a bachelor of fine arts degrees and master of fine arts degree from the California Institute of the Arts in Valencia, California. In 2015, Bradford was presented with the National Medal of the Arts. Earlier this year he was elected as a national academician by the National Academy Museum and School of Fine Arts in New York. He is also a recipient of The McArthur Fellowship (2009); the Wexner Center Residency Award (2009) and the Bucksbaum Award, granted by the Whitney Museum of American Art (2006).

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