DIRECTOR’S MESSAGE

Looking Back to Our Future

It is May, and Mark Bradford’s exhibition for the U.S. Pavilion at the Venice Biennale is finally upon us. For six months, the attention of the art world will be focused on Venice, and in no small part on Mark Bradford and the staggering body of new work he has produced for the occasion. It is only fitting then, that roughly concurrent with this event, we have the extraordinary honor of bringing into the BMA’s collection an exemplary painting by Mark Bradford’s Abstract Expressionist forbear, Norman Lewis. Born in Harlem in 1909, Lewis was one of the leading voices among the American Abstract Expressionists, yet, surprisingly, has not been recognized for his achievements to the same extent as his white male peers, nor has he been collected with the same vigor. Autumn Flight, 1956, is the first painting by Lewis to enter the BMA’s collection, giving our museum the chance, for the first time, to install that painting in its rightful position next to major works by Newman, Pollock, Hoffman, Klene, and Motherwell, as well as African American contemporaries like Alma Thomas and Sam Gilliam. Autumn Flight evokes a flock of birds moving through a mottled autumnal sky, referencing the natural world through the artist’s signature brand of abstraction. The paint was applied to the canvas in several layers by brushing and spraying, either directly or with the use of a sharp stencil. Among other things, Lewis is remembered for his capacity to blend abstraction and representation, allowing him to innovate formally just as he connected his painting to black urban life. Mark Bradford shares this conviction. His paintings are as much of the studio as they are of the world, a characteristic that makes his work very much about the future of abstraction, just as it is a bridge back to Lewis. The BMA is fortunate to own Bradford’s My Grandmother Felt the Color, 2016, and now Lewis’s Autumn Flight. These magnificent paintings represent the beginning of our commitment to become one of the greatest collections of Modern and Contemporary African American art anywhere.

Christopher Bedford
BMA Dorothy Wagner Walls Director

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