



REVIEW - 22 APR 2015

Mark Bradford

Rockbund Art Museum, Shanghai,
China

BY FRANCESCA TAROCCO



Mark
Bradford,
Falling Horse
(detail), 2014,
mixed media
on canvas, 3 x
12 m

The sparse hang of 'Tears of a Tree', Mark Bradford's focused and restrained exhibition at the Rockbund Art Museum (RAM) – the Los Angeles-based artist's first museum show in Asia – stands in contrast to the relentless space-filling of most recent shows I've seen in Shanghai. The curator, Clara M. Kim, structures the exhibition around three impressively unsettling, large *décollage* paintings

inspired by Bradford's time in Shanghai: *Falling Horses*, *The Tears of a Tree* and *Lazy Mountain* (all works 2014). Each 12-metre-long painting hangs on the one weight-bearing wall of each of the museum's three main floors, open to the luminous sunshine that filters through the narrow glass panes of the art deco windows. Accompanying these works are eight buoy-shaped sculptures, *The Loop of Deep Water 1-8*, suspended from the ceiling of the terrace-like space of the top floors of the museum.

Falling Horses and *The Tears of a Tree* refer to what Bradford describes as his encounter with the 'rewriting of the Shanghai landscape' and the orientalist anxieties intrinsic to Western representations of Shanghai and China during colonial times. *Falling Horses*, with its alchemical, cartographic evocation of a bird's-eye view of concession-era Shanghai, alludes to sedimentary urban layers and the continuous violent remapping of contemporary global cities. Bradford's work typically emphasizes the material allure of his surfaces. Made of several layers of bleached and sanded paper, including commercial posters and printed maps, the surfaces of these works are scratched and incised, raised and bumpy or, in other places, as smooth and luminous as old stones. These mixed-media works reward distant viewing but, even more so, closer inspection, where we can see traces of the artist's body and hands, scrubbing, cleansing, bleaching, tearing, accreting, erasing.

Bradford's work often addresses the ways in which modern nation-states and institutions affect people's lives. The works here seem to have inherited something of Shanghai's psychogeography, what writer Eileen Chang described as the 'dark and shadowy, and yet bright and clear' nature of the city. RAM itself is located in the historical Bund area, in

a narrow peninsular headland at the confluence of Suzhou Creek and the Huangpu River – a busy, working waterway filled with coal barges and tugboats. The colonial-era buildings surrounding the museum were – until recently – homes for thousands of people; now they are quickly filling up with luxury shops and restaurants. The irregular grids of *The Tears of a Tree* echo the surrounding area's complex temporal, socio-economic and architectural layering – the makeshift spatial arrangements, the myriad sheds, extensions and transient structures typical of the Shanghai vernacular are still visible from the museum's windows. In stark contrast, *Lazy Mountain* is reminiscent of a black and white mountain-scape, where the solid rock masses and crevices are animated by an almost-cinematic quality. The work is startlingly different from the other paintings in the exhibition in its powerful abstraction and rejection of recognizable source materials.



<http://tinyurl.com/ybge88bb>

The complex techniques and range of visual and intellectual references in Bradford's paintings highlight fundamental questions about the relationships among material, light, place and space. Bradford's works and their production processes expose the flaws in planners' visions of an ordered urban utopia, offering themselves up to the contestation of space, the violence of spectacle, the everyday rhythms of the street, and the dissonance and exuberance of the

metropolitan landscape.

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