

Mapping Displacement: Reclaiming Histories and Urban Realities

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SUID. (Sustainable Urban Industrial District) c.2019

In my practice, found materials are not merely mediums — they are collaborators. Insulation, latex paint, concrete, plastic bags, gauze, street detritus, and flier posters are intrinsic to my process, forming a language through which I engage the urban environment, its history, and the social and political geometries that define underserved communities.

These materials are imbued with their own life force, carrying the weight of the spaces they once occupied, the hands that handled them, and the stories they witnessed. In transforming them, I seek to map the divides and displacements within urban spaces, offering a textural and layered “heat map” of contemporary social concerns and conditions.

The Material as Witness: Street Detritus and Flier Posters

Much like artists who use materials to embed narrative into their works — Mark Bradford’s merchant posters or Theaster Gates’ salvaged building materials — I rely heavily on the fragments left behind in urban spaces. Posters torn or peeled from city walls after heavy rainfalls, street detritus picked up from neglected corners, or urban lots, and discarded objects scattered in the margins are more than remnants of daily life; they are witnesses to the social and political realities of the communities from which they are sourced.

In my work, these materials become tools of reclamation and recontextualization. A torn poster may carry the memory of a fleeting moment, an event that never came to pass, or a protest silenced. By incorporating these fragments into my artwork, I restore their agency, transforming them from forgotten debris into elements of a larger narrative. Each layer of material, each torn edge, becomes a mark on the map, a trace of the movement of people and power through the urban landscape.

Concrete, Insulation, and the Boundaries of Urban Space

Concrete and insulation — staples of urban construction and repair — play a pivotal role in my exploration of displacement and social divides. Both materials serve as literal and metaphorical boundaries, markers of spaces that divide and exclude. In the urban context, concrete walls signify the rigid, impassable borders that separate communities. Insulation, often hidden behind walls, embodies the unseen forces that shape and reinforce these divides — forces like socioeconomic inequality, gentrification, and systemic neglect.

When I incorporate these materials into my work, they act as both texture and symbol. The rough surface of concrete and the fibrous texture of insulation evoke the physicality of the built environment, while also suggesting how communities are insulated — cut off — from access, opportunity, and visibility. As I work with these materials, layering them with other found objects, I seek to capture the tension between visibility and invisibility, between inclusion and exclusion.

Plastic Bags and Latex Paint: Narratives of Disposability and Transformation

Plastic bags and latex paint, both materials synonymous with disposability, reflect the ephemeral nature of contemporary urban life. Plastic bags, often seen tumbling down city streets, are ubiquitous symbols of waste, byproducts of consumer culture and environmental neglect. Yet in my work, plastic bags are transformed from waste into something else entirely — whether stretched, layered, or melted into new forms, they become part of a visual language that speaks to cycles of consumption, abandonment, and renewal.

Latex paint, a common material in construction and repair, similarly holds potential for transformation. When latex is applied to found materials, it acts as both a unifier and a disruptor. It can obscure the original surface, masking the object's underlying history. Still, it can also highlight the textures and imperfections of the materials, allowing the hidden narratives to emerge. In this way, the paint becomes an agent of both erasure and revelation, a duality that mirrors the social and political forces at work in the urban spaces I seek to map.

The Aesthetic of Reuse: Resilience and Agency in Found Materials

In the act of reusing and recycling these found materials, there is a clear political and social statement. Like El Anatsui's use of discarded bottle caps or Ibrahim Mahama's repurposing of jute sacks, my practice challenges the systems of consumption and waste that define contemporary society.

I draw upon my personal experience as Latino growing up in Brooklyn, and the wisdom of a 3rd grade educated mother who grew up in rural Puerto Rico. Our possessions were often used and reused until they could no longer serve their purpose. The materials I work with — whether insulation, plastic bags, or the street found — are often discarded without thought, seen as no longer useful. But in the act of reclaiming and recontextualizing these objects, I give them new life, allowing them to tell new stories that might otherwise be lost.

This act of reclamation is a deeply political one, particularly in the context of underserved communities. As many of these materials carry the weight of the places and spaces they come from — the marginalized spaces, the neglected and underserved corners of the city. By integrating these materials into my work, I bring attention to the experiences of those who are often excluded from the dominant narratives of urban life. In this way my practice becomes a channel of giving agency to these materials and, by extension, to the people and places, and lived experiences they represent.

Mapping Social Geometries: A Heat Map of Displacement

Ultimately, the use of found and recycled materials in my work function as a form of mapping, nameless and placeless geometries, culled from data sets, statistics and the research into people of color — mapping the invisible lines of power, displacement, and exploitation that shape urban environments.

The layers of insulation, concrete, plastic, and street posters that make up my work are not just physical layers; they are layers of meaning, history, and social complexity. The textures and forms I create through these materials act as a kind of “textural map,” allowing the viewer to see and feel the social and political divides that exist in the urban spaces I inhabit.

Like Mark Bradford’s layered canvases or Julie Mehretu’s abstract topographies, my work seeks to render visible the invisible geometries of social power. In the rough textures of concrete, the torn and frayed

edges of printed posters, the translucence and elasticity of plastic bags — all of these elements come together to create a topographical framework of the fractured and broken, a collaged assembly of contemporary urban life. It is a map that reflects the displacement, resilience, and survival of those living in the margins, offering a commentary on the larger forces at play in the urban environment.

Found Materials as Living Archives

The materials I use — whether insulation, latex paint, concrete, or discarded street posters — are not passive objects. In my work, they are active participants in the narratives I seek to construct, as each material carries a history, a memory, a story. In reclaiming and repurposing these materials, I transform them into living archives of the social, political, and economic conditions that define the spaces I inhabit and work within.

In my practice, found materials are more than just a method of creation; they are a means of engaging with the world around me, of mapping its complexities and revealing its hidden structures. Through the act of reuse and transformation, I seek to give voice to the materials, and by extension, to the communities they represent.

Noel Caban, c. 2024

Theaster Gates — <https://www.archdaily.com/1016950/on-ethics-and-fair-labor-in-architecture-the-example-of-theaster-gates-serpentine-pavilion-design>

Mark Bradford — <https://www.artmajeur.com/en/magazine/8-artist-portraits/mark-bradford-a-master-of-layered-abstraction-and-social-commentary/336325>

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Ibrahim Mahama

— <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/09/19/arts/design/ibrahim-mahama-artist-ghana-white-cube.html>

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