

GALLERIES • WEEKEND

Katherine Bradford Dives In

by John Yau on January 17, 2016



(left) Katherine Bradford, “Surf Party” (2015), acrylic on canvas, 72 x 55 inches (all images courtesy Canada, New York)

I certainly wasn't the only person to be dazzled by Katherine Bradford's breakthrough show, *Desire for Transport*, at Edward Thorp (April 27–June 2, 2007), nearly a decade ago. In fact, I was so knocked out that I made a point to see as much of her work as I could. In 2012, Bradford had her second solo show, *New Work*, at the same gallery, and a year later came her first museum show, *August*, at the Bowdoin College Museum of Art, Brunswick, Maine (June 29 – September 1, 2013). Having seen and reviewed these three exhibitions, I am delighted to announce that Bradford has made yet another breakthrough, as evidenced by her most recent show, *Fear of Waves*, at Canada (January 9–February 14, 2016), her first with this stalwart Lower East Side Gallery.

In her earlier exhibitions, Bradford took what I called, “the unlikely genre of marine painting and transformed it into a densely packed, metaphorical realm.” This is what I wrote about a small ship painting in August:

In “*Titanic Orange Sea*” (2012), Bradford does something counterintuitive and inexplicable; she makes the sea a thickly painted orange rectangle with a diffuse stroke of white paint spanning both the top and bottom, turning the painting into a monochromatic abstraction on which both a ship and iceberg (an unavoidable collision and disaster) sit.

(right) Katherine Bradford, “*Surfer*” (2015), acrylic on canvas, 72 x 55 inches

In many of the paintings from this decade, a single subject – a foreshortened hull becalmed at sea, or a figure in mid-dive, or a superhero in baggy shorts who is about to zoom off – is juxtaposed against a largely monochromatic ground representing water or air. For the most part, the compositions are relatively simple and straightforward. Disaster, inflated masculinity, and ineffectual superheroes seemed to be much on the artist's mind.



In her most recent work, Bradford has upped the stakes of her

earlier work. For one thing, she has complicated her compositions by adding many more figures as well as dividing the ground in two or more distinct areas, water and sky, for example. The complications are the result of her pushing both the formal and imaginative further into a fictive domain without letting one get ahead of the other.

Bradford's unfussy directness has drawn comparisons with the awkward informality of David Park. The similarity is superficial, however. Bradford's artlessness seems to come from a refusal to worry about getting it right, though the results are very different. It is not gestural like Park's thick strokes. The light in her painting is imagined, not observed. A short brushstroke becomes a bathing suit, while still being nothing more than a dab of paint. Bradford came by this way of painting on her own.

In the strongest and largest paintings in *Fear of Waves*, it is the off-kilter and incomprehensible that skews our experience, leaves us scratching our heads, puzzled, captivated and a bit undone. I was reminded of the opening stanza of Elizabeth Bishop's poem, "Trouvee":



Oh, why should a hen
have been run over
on West 4th Street
in the middle of summer?

Like Bishop, we know there is an answer to the question, but what is more important is how detailed we can make the question, as this helps us see the painting more clearly. As if illuminated or radiated from within, all eleven, of the loosely worked acrylic paintings in *Fear of Waves* glow with a soft, unearthly light. Is the light mystical, the stuff of dreams, or a nagging

reminder that radiation is constantly leaking into our water and air, slowly poisoning our world?

(left) Katherine Bradford, "Fathers" (2016), acrylic on drop cloth, 70 x 96 inches

The strongest paintings in the exhibition include "Surf Party" (2015), "Blue Swimmers" (2015), "Fear of Waves" (2015), "Pool Swimmers, Green" (2015) and "Fathers" (2016). One or two colors dominate each of these paintings, which Bradford does not repeat. In "Blue Swimmers" and "Pool Swimmers, Green," the figures are submerged in a washy field of blue or green, which complicates the figure/ground relationship. This is especially effective in "Blue Swimmers," one of my favorite paintings in the exhibition, where it is impossible to determine the extent to which the water is submerging the slightly darker, blue-skinned figures, some of whom are standing, while others are swimming. In the painting's lower left corner, a standing blue figure has been painted over a smaller, pink, swimming figure, an instance of what Philip Guston called "a legible record of all decisions, whether tentative or assured." In these moments Bradford arrives at what he went on to define as "the simultaneity of thinking and making." You get the feeling she changed the painting from a benign view to a disconcerting one, and that the transformation was inevitable.

(right) Katherine Bradford, "Blue Swimmers" (2015), acrylic on canvas 60 x 48 inches

The figures in "Blue Swimmers" are ghostly and insubstantial, made of watery brushstrokes the same consistency as the water. The bluish skin gives the swimmers a deathly pallor, while the crepuscular light is just plain creepy and weird. Who are these hulking figures? Are they zombies on vacation? Bradford does not stop there. What really turns this painting into something else is her placement of what appear to be two fish overlapping the standing figure on the lower left. Are they leaping out of the ocean? Is everyone underwater, including the ones who seem to be swimming? Our inability to locate these things riddles the painting with a disturbing instability. Finally, we are likely to ask ourselves: are these people enjoying themselves or are they stuck in one of the circles of hell, doomed to swim back and forth for eternity?

Look long enough at Bradford paintings and all kinds of incongruous details will rise to the surface of your consciousness. What about the figure on the left side of "Surf Party" who appears to be wearing a white astronaut suit? What is the pinkish-red striated wall behind him made of? Doesn't it look like a slice of flesh taken from some unidentifiable animal? Why has the water in "Blonds in the Sun, Lifeguard" (2015) risen so high that it has covered much of the lifeguard chair, nearly reaching the figure seated in it? Is she a witness to something she cannot stop? Is it a coincidence that the three figures have the same blond hair and blond bathing suits or is it a sign of their collective fear of making waves? What about the naked men in "Fathers" (2016)? They are seated around the edge of a large, rubber wading pool that seems to be floating on an ocean in which the stars are reflected. Are the electric blue streaks we see fish or something else? Questions follow questions, pulling us deeper into these paintings.

For all of the frolicking going on in Bradford's paintings, calamity seems to be lurking throughout, like sharks whose fins haven't risen above the water. In the turquoise-green painting, "Fear of Waves," we have a front row, aerial view of dozens of swimmers running, swimming and paddling towards shore, which is nowhere in sight, ahead of the waves rolling in from right to left. The figures are in chaos while the scythe-like waves advance undeterred, like a Roman phalanx.



(left) Katherine Bradford, "Fear of Waves" (2015), oil on canvas, 84 x 72 inches

These are Bradford's "Deluge" paintings – that's what I mean by breakthrough. She has done something unforeseen – the envisioning of an all-consuming catastrophe of biblical proportions. She is not only updating Guston's own take on a subject that stretches as far back as Leonardo da Vinci's drawings of cataclysmic storms, done in the last decade of his life, but she is also gaining parity with him, endowing these new works with a particular gravitas that wasn't always apparent in the earlier work. Bradford has transformed the whimsical into the catastrophic, its polar opposite, without losing her offhand humor.

One senses that global warming, the nuclear meltdown at Fukushima, and other disasters may have been on

Bradford's mind when she worked on these paintings, but she never spells these possibilities out, never makes them the explicit subject of the paintings. These are not didactic views. In fact, the people occupying Bradford's paintings seem to be enjoying themselves, for the most part, unaware that any disaster might be impending. That too seems to be the subject of these forceful works.

Fear of Waves continues at Canada (333 Broome Street, Lower East Side, Manhattan) through February 14.

<http://hyperallergic.com/267772/katherine-bradford-dives-in/>