



Fear of Waves, 2015, oil on canvas.

KATHERINE BRADFORD

When this Brooklyn-based artist began populating her colorful abstract canvases with figures, she became a late-in-life art-world success story.

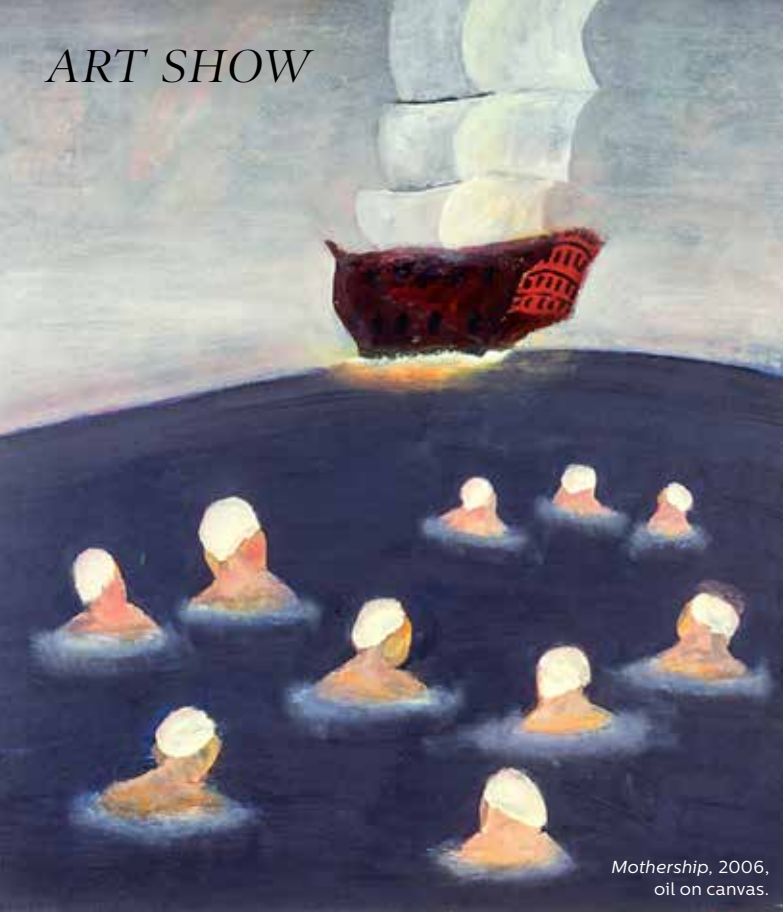
BY JULIE L. BELCOVE

In art lingo, the terms *emerging artist* and *young artist* are often used interchangeably. So when the New York gallery Canada, known for identifying fresh talent, mounted a show last year featuring moody canvases of swimmers awash in luminous purples and blues and heavily indebted to abstraction, more than a few onlookers were startled to learn that the breakthrough works were painted by a 73-year-old grandmother.

But then Katherine Bradford, their gray-haired—with a shock of hot pink—creator, has never adhered to a traditional timeline. She didn't pick up her first paintbrush until she was a wife

and mother living in Maine, where she'd moved with her young family in 1969 and fell in with a group of artists. "The way they lived their lives and questioned the system appealed to me so much," she says in her Williamsburg, Brooklyn, studio. "It finally clicked with me that being an artist was a way of going through life, a whole worldview. I could relate to that."

Drawn to the work of abstract painters Joan Snyder and Cy Twombly, Bradford says, "I wanted to make marks." Living in Maine, she was also keenly aware of the legacy of landscape modernists Marsden Hartley and John Marin—"the kind ▷



Mothership, 2006,
oil on canvas.



Couple, Beach, 2016,
acrylic on canvas.



*Red Studio
Brooklyn*, 2016,
acrylic on canvas.

of painters who saw something in the landscape, something almost spiritual,” she says. “I wanted to see if I could add to the conversation.”

Her initial stabs at pure abstraction eventually gave way to roughly conjured figures. “Those marks started to look like something, like letters or numbers,” says Bradford. “I would take them out at first. Then I realized, Why not leave them in?”

Her acclaimed swimmers, for instance, came about because she thought her sea of marks began to resemble the actual sea. “I thought, If it looks like water, I could put boats in it,” she says. “Very brusquely, very economically. Those are words I like.”

Bradford, who taught writing to support herself in the 1980s after divorcing her husband, coming out as a lesbian, and moving to New York with her twins, disdains many of the adjectives often applied to her style, such as *naive* and *childlike*. She prefers *direct*, *nonacademic*, *ironic*, and *transgressive*. Her swimmers are more like suggestions of figures, with a brushstroke or two serving as an arm or a leg. They rarely have faces, and, through a technique called figure-ground reversal, dabs of paint composing sky or sea double as swimsuits.

Applying thin layers of acrylic paint, she relies on intuition. “I have had to turn off my brain,” she says, a lesson she tries to impart to her students in the Yale University School of Art’s MFA program. She “stumbled on the idea” of putting some of her swimmers in outer space, for instance, while painting a night sky.

Bradford makes use of cropping—legs popping out of the water, a head swimming into the frame—and repetition. Asked how many canvases she works on at a time, she replies, “Lots. Sometimes I line them up here and take a brush, like a doctor visiting a ward, and I try to save the ones that are dying. The trouble with that method is it’s expensive because you have a lot of unfinished paintings around.”

Though a big fan of Instagram as a means of building an artistic community, Bradford is a sharp critic of painters who depend on digital sources instead of their imagination. “The great joy of doing these paintings is to birth them, is to have them come out of you,” says the painter. “Then you sit back and say, ‘What is this? Do I like it? And do I want to keep it?’” ■