

TWO COATS OF PAINT

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Katherine Bradford: Deep image painting

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Katherine Bradford, Water Lady, 2018, acrylic on canvas, 80 x 68 inches

Contributed by Jason Andrew / The art of Katherine Bradford, on view at Canada through October 21, is *deep image* painting. Her often heroic imagery and surrealist leaps echo a floating world, one that narratively exists between the real and the dream. Each work has a self-conscious spiritualist language that represents a developing poetic stance – a story that starts, but never finishes its tale.

Take the painting *Water Lady*, a monolithic central figure with a glowing red rectangle on the chest, kneels in a pool of water. In a cross-body reach, the figure collects water as it pours from a bottle suspended in mid-air. It's a dreamlike picture in which identity is represented not just by the faceless pink painted human form, but also by the collective symbolic setting. What's most arresting about this picture, aside from the odd outstretched arms that occupy the bottom margin of the canvas, is that it situates us in the middle of the narrative and prompts us to ask, "How did we get here?" and "How will it end?" These questions are inherent in all of Bradford's work.



Katherine Bradford, One Man's Tub, 2018, acrylic on canvas 72 x 60 inches

The term *deep image* was coined in the early 1960s by American poets [Jerome Rothenberg](#) and [Robert Kelly](#) to describe their own writing style, which was characterized by a resonant and heroic tone, unexpected juxtapositions, and surrealist leaps. It was a style inspired as much by [Charles Olson's projectivism](#) as by the cante jondo or *deep song* and the poetry of [Federico García Lorca](#).

For Rothenberg, the *deep image* poem reflected two realities: first, the empirical world of the naïve realist of what we know; second, the hidden *floating* world of what is to be discovered. The first world both hides and leads into the second, which in turn as a lure and a repository of dreams. For Rothenberg, *deep work* is perception and vision, and the poem is the movement between them. For Bradford, paint is instead the vehicle.



Katherine Bradford, *Suits*, 2018, acrylic on canvas 68 x 80 inches



Katherine Bradford, *Olympiad*, 2018, acrylic on canvas 60 x 48 inches



Katherine Bradford, *Waiting Room*, 2018 acrylic on canvas, 80 x 136 inches

At 76, Bradford's personal and empathic style of figurative abstraction dives deep into human psyche. Over the years she has introduced themes that range from Superman and swimmers to *Titanic*-like ocean liners. As a master mark-maker with a five-inch brush, her work has been placed in the broad context of Abstract Expressionism. I think it pleases Bradford that we can approach her work from an abstract point of view, but the very complex and deeply psychological pictures tell us more influences are afoot.

Bradford may be a more direct artistic descendant of the late, great [Elizabeth Murray](#), who famously brought subject matter back into abstraction. Bradford also channels [Joan Brown](#), whose work conveyed a kind of ipso facto feminism. And Bradford borrows the poetic excess found in the paintings by [Alice Neel](#). In all cases, Bradford has learned from the best, composed on her own, and developed an impeccable instinct.

In *Suits*, a single figure standing ankle deep in phthalo-blue is placed in the center of a painting balancing on its head, a gargantuan guy in a suit. The situation, proportion, and perspective all recall the work of [Viola Frey](#), the ceramicist who often depicted her male figures in business attire. And like Frey, Bradford's suit looks expressionless and has a small mouth – perhaps implying that, for all their vitality, these suits she has in mind have limited powers of speech. The work offers a subtle critique of our contemporary social structure and stereotypes, but in Bradford's deep image, the central figure, though stripped to his undershorts and seemingly so small in comparison to the huge suit, is our hero.

Similarly, in *Olympiad*, a gymnast with folded limbs hovers above a seated figure that rests straight-backed in knee-high black boots while a third figure looks on. It's a complicated composition that Bradford makes simple with quick gestural marks.

There is a sea of connections that float among all of us, a place where speech is tough but paint can

narrate better. In two huge diptychs titled *Waiting Room* and *All of Us*, Bradford sets an anxious scene where figures in the latter turn their backs on the viewer and figures in the former confront the viewer.



Katherine Bradford, *All of Us*, 2018, acrylic on canvas, 80 x 136 inches

There is an implied intimacy, but we are left to ourselves to decipher the narrative. In *All of Us*, I can't help but hear lyrics from that old song from *Scissor Sisters* "it's a bitch convincing people to like you" as a naked female character in the foreground levitates on a jetty-spray of her own breast milk.

"Intimacy," as observed by one of Bradford's more than 35,100 followers on Instagram, "appears in the positive and negative space." Intimacy can be kind, but also deep and deranged, as is apparent in the fluorescently lit zombie folk that populate Bradford's *Waiting Room*(2018).

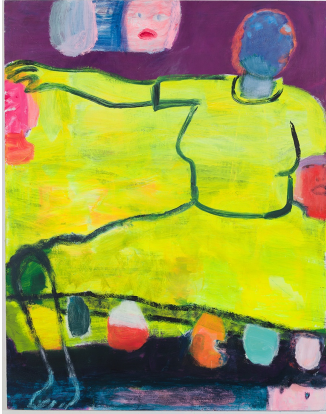


Katherine Bradford, *Wedding Circle*, 2018, acrylic on canvas, 68 x 80 inches



Katherine Bradford, *Lunch Painting*, 2018, acrylic on canvas, 68 x 80 inches

Color has always set the mood in Bradford's deep dive. In *Yellow Dress*, she introduces an Ella Fitzgerald type of character. There is a jazzy syncopation at work in this painting as a larger-than-life figure cantilevers to the right while an array of colorful faces bounce like improvised-nonsense-scat-singers across the painting, hitting every note in Bradford's straight-shooting-homespun-funkiness songbook.



Katherine Bradford, *Yellow Dress*, 2018 acrylic on canvas, 84 x 66 inches

Matisse's *The Dance I* (1909) is alive in Bradford's *Wedding Circle*. But while in the former we have joy, freedom, and celebration, in Bradford's we are confronted by a closed circle of stagnant motionless figures seemingly waiting for the real party to start.

Lunch Painting is inspired by the direct and down-to-earth *Lunch Poems* of Frank O'Hara.

In *Couple No Shirts*, Bradford represents her subjects with direct, frontal poses akin to early portrait photography but skews the composition simply by having the subject on the left cross their legs. This introduces a diagonal that sends the eye scanning from left to right and back again in a process that slows us into looking.



Katherine Bradford, *Couple No Shirts*, 2018, acrylic on canvas 60 x 48 inches

In a recent interview on the occasion of her first solo museum show at the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth, Bradford comments that she's standing up for her "belief in talking about empathy and the interior life." Building on decades of painting with a cascade of impulsive brush strokes, she does just that while painting us to the edge of that shoreless gulf between the real and the dream.

"*Katherine Bradford: Friends and Strangers*," Canada, Lower East Side, New York, NY. through October 21, 2018.

About the author: Jason Andrew is an independent scholar, curator, and producer who co-founded and directs Norte Maar, a non-profit organization that creates, promotes, and presents collaborative projects in the arts. He can be followed on Twitter, @jandrewARTS.