

HYPERALLERGIC

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The Amazing Katherine Bradford

Bradford's new paintings represent a significant departure from her previous work, which gained many admirers, myself included. Simply put: she has gotten much better at getting at difficult subjects.

John Yau | [September 30, 2018](#)



“What was to go on the canvas was not a picture but an event.” This is how Harold Rosenberg characterized the work of the gestural Abstract Expressionist painters in his famous essay, “The American action painters” (1952). He went on to say, “The image would be the result of this encounter.” I am sure that I was not the only one who thought of Rosenberg’s essay when viewing the exhibition, *Katherine Bradford: Friends and Strangers*, at CANADA, her second show at the gallery.

The other association that Bradford's paintings summoned was with lovely fruity flavors of sorbet: pink grapefruit; raspberry; blueberry; elderberry; Meyer lemon; blackberries; and pomegranate, just to name a few. Bradford has started using colors that evoke those summery flavors, as well as the colors that one finds in Mark Rothko's abstract paintings. Emotionally, her palette goes from cheery to moody, with a few acidic hues thrown in to complicate our response.

For those of us who have followed Bradford since 2007, when she began showing regularly in New York, the new paintings represent a significant departure from her previous work, which gained many admirers, myself included. Simply put: she has gotten much better at getting at difficult subjects.



The changes include subject matter, palette, and process — which amounts to nearly everything. Her work seemingly has not changed at all, which suggests to me that this is not about style, but about getting in touch with one's deepest empathetic emotions. As a result, her work has intensified in feeling. Bradford has transformed visual dislocations into the very colors and forms of her compositions, steeping what might initially seem sweet and arbitrary in

sadness and isolation. What makes this change even more powerful is that paintings don't seem to be about Bradford's interior life. Rather they seem to be about what she sees; they are about us and our despair.

The exhibition consists of 11 paintings in acrylic, two of which are diptychs. Each work is worthy of an essay. Bradford previously used thin layers of color, but now the earlier colors and forms are more visible through the final layer of brushy colors. A ghostly aura pervades many of the paintings, evoking the feeling of something unspoken suffusing her subject's lives.



In “Lunch Painting” (2018), 12 figures, outlined in red paint, are gathered around a large table full of food, most notably a large red fish that seems to be smiling. The drawing is rudimentary, with

just enough definition to make all the figures and their postures distinctive. Bradford's abilities with a single, unaltered, calligraphic line are most evident in the three figures at the far end of the tilted table's outlined plane (which forms a parallelogram), the tops of their heads sitting just below the painting's top edge. Her animated line tells us about their postures, how their arms rest on the table. She gets a lot out of very little — all while making her drawing seem natural and effortless. The tilt of the table's plane leads our eye toward the top of the painting.

Featureless and more abstract than the other nine figures at the table, and unlike the others, with no plates, the three calligraphic figures at the table's far end nevertheless hold their own in this company. At the near end of the table (at the bottom of the painting), where another three figures are seated, Bradford again makes each figure's comportment distinctive. In this grouping, the figure on the far left, whose head is turned toward the one in the middle, has a distinguishing profile, while the tilt of the adjacent person's head signals that attention is being paid. She seems so at ease with her line that we might not immediately recognize how good and unembarrassed she is. However, the painting also evidences a number of earlier efforts visible beneath the final one; blocks of green and ghostly erasures peer through the outlined figures and yellowish-white ground. Like the other works in the exhibition, "Luncheon Painting" is a palimpsest.

Bradford's attention to detail also becomes clear from prolonged looking. Two figures on the left seem to be talking simultaneously across the table, their mouths wide open, while another person on that side is busy eating. Two more figures are bent over, eating, while a figure on the right is looking across the table. In this area of the painting no communication or camaraderie takes place.

We likely don't need to discern that there are 12 figures at the table and one chair is empty, to make a connection with "The Last Supper." Without fanfare, Bradford has taken up a Renaissance subject that has historically belonged exclusively to men. In this, she shares something with Emily Wilson, who is the first woman to translate *The Odyssey*.

The tension and perhaps irresolvable problems of the individual versus the group comes through in the diptych, "Waiting Room" (2018), where six men are depicted frontally, flanked by the outlines of legs extending in from the painting's left and right edges.

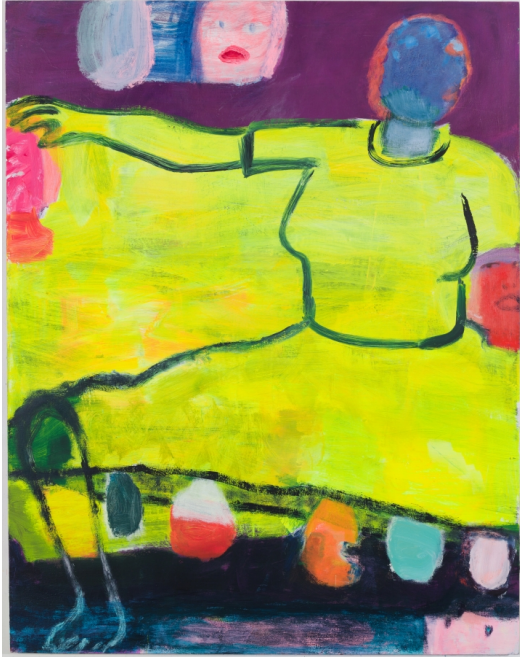
Benign as this painting initially appears, with its egg-yolk yellows, pale pinks, and royal violets, a deep contemporary anxiety fills it in a quiet, understated way.

Two rows of three figures face the viewer, staggered so that all are visible. Five of the figures are featureless and wearing pullover shirts or jerseys. Their faces are either pink or reddish-orange. The three with pink faces are wearing violet jerseys that suggest a uniform or sports apparel; one has an insignia on it.

The one exception to all this is the figure in the middle of the first row. He stands slightly ahead of the two men flanking him, and wears a white shirt and black tie. His skin is the same yellow as the painting's ground. His coloring differs from that of the men surrounding him; he is indistinguishable from the background.

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At the same time, "Waiting Room" is open to a completely different reading, which is why it is such a powerful visual statement. The man in the white shirt is the only one with facial features. The rest are faceless, as people often feel in waiting rooms. Is the man a doctor, who the world recognizes as an individual, while his patients are just faceless figures in a dysfunctional health care system? The painting's ambiguity and the possible interpretations that rise to its surface come from Bradford's use of color and composition.



The exhibition's most powerful and mysterious painting is "Yellow Dress" (2018), which shows a woman in a greenish-yellow dress sitting on a sofa of the same color. Like the figures in "Lunch Painting," Bradford has drawn the woman's outline, her right arm stretched across the back of the sofa, the green outline of her fingers gently touching what appears to be a pink, featureless head. The woman's face is painted steel-blue, and she looks to the right, as if she does not want to see or think about what is going on

Her legs and bare feet are spread apart so widely that we see only the outline of her right calf and foot, slanted slightly toward the painting's left edge, while her right calf and foot are unseen, cropped by the painting's right edge. Five large, head-like shapes extend from inside the dress's wide hem, which stretches across the lower part of the painting. A body and head lie on the painting's bottom edge, beneath the row of inverted head-like shapes, being pressed under the woman's foot. Seen in profile, the prone figure's pink face stares up at a similarly colored featureless head sticking out from the dress. Meanwhile, the woman's other arm is a truncated stub culminating in a bodiless head with an open mouth, two dots for nostrils, and an outline for eyes, one of which is cropped by the painting's right edge.

It is hard to give a name to the feelings of dislocation stirred by the woman, who seems to give birth to five bodiless heads simultaneously. I certainly cannot identify what is going on in the painting, and yet everything comes across as defined and particular. If this is a painting about birth and death and everything in between, Bradford has dealt with a loaded subject without becoming pompous or overbearing. The woman's steel-gray face is riveting. What is she

feeling? No clear answer is forthcoming.

Very few figurative painters go down as many roads as Bradford has. Even fewer continually reinvent themselves while pushing into new areas. By becoming a process painter who is not afraid of destroying an image and starting over again, she remains open to impulse and to discovering her subject as she goes along. She resists repeating herself or focusing on a theme. The results are remarkable.

Katherine Bradford: *Friends and Strangers continues at Canada (333 Broome Street, Manhattan) through October 21.*