

► CRITICISM

Friday, October 12th, 2018

[print](#)

Subtle Ambiguities: Katherine Bradford at CANADA

by Dennis Kardon

Katherine Bradford: Friends and Strangers at CANADA

September 14 to October 21, 2018

333 Broome Street, between Chrystie Street and Bowery

New York City, canadaneewyork.com



At first glance, Katherine Bradford doesn't seem eager to get too specific. Her figures often have no faces nor even much by way of hands. Gender and race feel indicated without necessarily being perfectly legible. And though maybe she is ingenuously concealing a lack of facility, it is more likely that it is precisely in that twilight between the apparent arbitrariness of a brush stroke and the haptic perception of a particular feeling that Bradford has staked her territory. Ambiguity plays a special role in complicating the tension between the ideas of painting and the way Bradford uses them to define sexuality, gender and race, and how that might influence the way we intuitively observe human relationships.

While this new show at Canada, *Friends and Strangers*, is not exactly a departure from the greater arc of her work, one thing that stands out is that she no longer feels the need to use overt themes like ships, superheroes, or bathers to unify a body of work. The eleven paintings here were done this year and range in size from 4 x 5 feet, to 6½ x 11 feet. They all contain at least one figure and up to around 13 (if you count fragments). But these paintings are not only large in size: The figures that inhabit them are also large-scale, and all the while Bradford paints them in a way that retains a genetic memory of color field abstraction.



Most of the paintings here employ abstract painting ideas to produce fantastic kinds of subject matter, where a figure may levitate, or levitate *and* squirt milk not just from her breasts, but also from the whole length of her body. Or sit on a giant firearm gathering snowball ammunition. Or drip heads from beneath a skirt. They just cry out for interpretation. But even the most simple and direct of the images here, a painting titled *Couple No Shirts*, demonstrates what might be at stake in the kinds of ambiguities Bradford constructs.

Nothing surreal is happening, just two people, sitting and facing out. Though for faces there are only large mauve brush strokes where eyes and mouths would be. At five feet, the height of the painting makes them slightly larger than their viewers.

The right sitter has arms folded over straight legs, and the other sits crossed-legged, with her left hand resting on the shoulder of the other figure. Though I am using the female pronoun, that assumption is just one of several that might end up a bit awkward, especially with these paintings. And especially right now in a cultural moment where categories that used to be quite clearly defined, like gender, sexuality, race, etc., are now much more fluid. We can't be really certain whether this couple is two women, two men, or mixed. But our brains nevertheless seem compelled to leap to quick categorizations, which in Bradford's pictorial reality become suspect upon scrutiny. Bradford seems to exploit this by getting fuzzy just at the instant where we make those assumptions.

"Couple No Shirts": There is an implication of semi-nudity, relationship and sexuality in that title. But you can't rely too much on the title because, despite the "no shirts" stipulation, one of the figures seems to sport an ultramarine one (or is it a jacket?) that is open in front. Exposed female breasts in paintings might be conventionally titillating, but the right figure's shoulders are broad, hair short, and because the revealed breasts are also small, they could be male breasts.

And yet Bradford is really subtle about this ambiguity. That chest is a painted cloud of about three overlapping wan colors close in tone. There is a slightly darker brush stroke that runs just under the nipples which perhaps defines the shape of the breasts as female, but it is so matter-of-factly brushed that one may feel a little pervy for needing to look that closely.

The couple does sport the same milky blue hair color, though Left's hairstyle is slightly longer and on a man would look like a Prince Valiant cut. Right is wearing pants that aren't as tight as Left's red pants that cling to her thin calves. Because of this fashion choice, the delicate, bare feet, and slightness of the upper torso (Bradford really outdoes herself in the economical painting of that slightly curved belly) I have already unconsciously registered Left



as female. Though to further challenge masculine/feminine convention, if you examine Left's lower calf, Bradford has painted a thin wash over tiny short dark marks to indicate hair.

Bradford continually lets us believe she is casually doing hardly anything when she is in fact subtly constructing significance through weight and volume. Looking closely at the way she paints the hand resting on the companion's shoulder, even though the fingers are barely indicated, it is impossible not to feel tenderness in the way it rests so caressingly.

But who are these people and what is their relationship, and why is Bradford presenting them to us so anonymously yet so insistently? In my mind this is a lesbian couple. Further I conjecture it is a self-portrait of Bradford and her long time partner, Jane O'Wyatt, though I'm aware I have possibly gone way too far in making this hypothesis.

Bradford, by coyly scattering conflicting signifiers wants viewers to question assumptions of gender, age, and relationship precisely such as this one. This constant questioning and recalibration process is the experience not only of looking at any Bradford painting, it also goes to the heart of how one forms attitudes and fantasies about other people in the world.



Bradford expresses her ambition not only through scale, but also through a desire for universality, to illuminate what it might be like to be alive at this moment. We want good art to feel universal, yet if we look around us these days just crossing the street, everyone we encounter projects signifiers of their own strange particularities, not just of socioeconomic status but of personal history, interests, attitudes, proclivities, pains, fears, desires. And body types to satisfy those desires of which universal norms no longer apply. To attend to

the conversations of strangers might lead one to believe we could be living among aliens. So painting specific people to represent humanity can end up being unrelatable for large groups of people, and yet generalized depictions risk becoming boringly generic.

This is Katherine Bradford's predicament. She confronts it with thoughtfulness, diligence, and humor. Her approach here seems threefold. Some of her paintings like *Water Lady* or *Yellow Dress* construct metaphors for private psychological states, which might not be specifically familiar, but are legible as the kind of specifically interior feelings we all have. And some of her paintings like *Wedding Circle*, *Lunch Painting* and *Waiting Room*, depict group experiences that in their anonymity could be familiarly alienating for everyone. But in a few of her paintings like *One Man's Tub*, where a wide-eyed man in underpants lies stretched out beside his coffin-like bathtub, and *Couple No Shirts*, it feels like in their ordinariness there is a tacit acknowledgement, whether alone or as a couple, of what we all eventually must face.