

WEBEXCLUSIVE

# Katherine Bradford: *Friends and Strangers*

by Lilly Wei

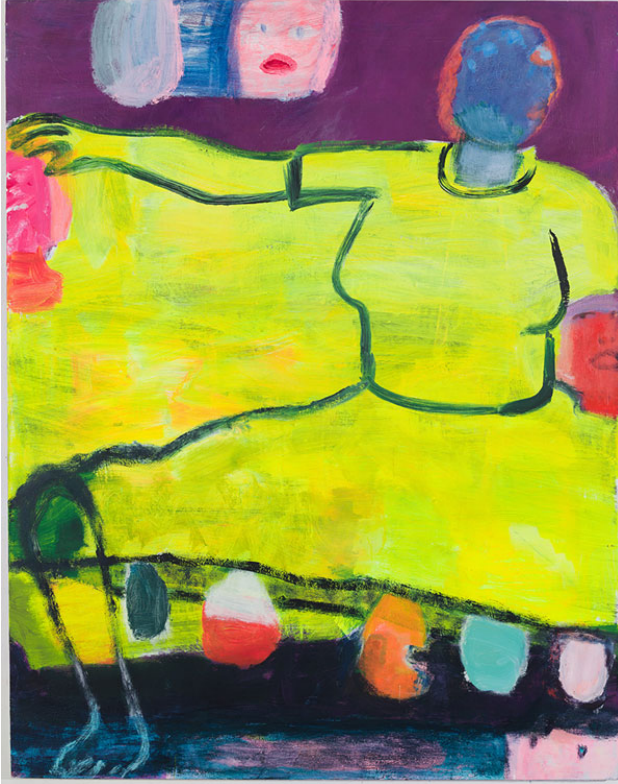
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It's the high pitch of the colors of *Waiting Room*—the first painting you see upon entering the gallery—that will stop you in your tracks. The day outside was sunny, warm but the painting seemed even brighter, the brushy, scrambled yellows of the ground almost gilded, radiating their own heat and light. Then again, it might be the half dozen figures facing you that rivet your gaze, clothed in equally vivid, clamorous notes of pinks and oranges that have a kind of reverb, the sensation dissonant, but thrilling. As for subject, that can prove enigmatic, as in all the works, the compositions'

oddities sometimes cloaked at first by what seems to be mundane social events before veering off into far less certain terrain.

The central figures in *Waiting Room* are positioned frontally, all with arms at their sides, all men, but only one has been given eyes, nose, a mouth and another one a pair of glasses. Why? And why is the only person with features wearing a shirt and tie? The other faces are blank, their skin tones pale pink to orange-red to yellow. Does that indicate race? While the three men in front seem to advance forward, out of the picture plane, cut off at the knees, the three men hovering behind are merely torsos, terminating abruptly sans legs. Meanwhile, on either side extending inward from the edges, sketched in black, are a number of (compensatory?) legs, some women's. They belong to persons who are located beyond the picture plane. A couple of pairs of legs on the left side are lying limply on the ground, and the two pairs on the right side are positioned seated, crossed. The scene has curiously shifted from color to black and white—well, black and yellow. What is happening? The title, *Waiting Room*, is that a clue? Is it about detention centers, about refugees, immigrants, and accumulating restrictions? Is it a less fraught social space, simply



a place to wait for a train, plane, bus, or other types of appointments? Is it a scene from a television drama? Is it a metaphor, existence as a Beckettian waiting room, waiting for what?

That the paintings in *Friends and Strangers*, all from 2018, are remarkable is not a surprise since Katherine Bradford has been making such (figurative) paintings for decades. Advocating for the medium and its processes, her canvases revel in paint's materiality, its infinite color interactions as well as its ability to clean up immaculately, to miraculously present and represent, to be both fact and fiction. While she teases your imagination with her imagery, she often says that her paintings are really about color relationships and getting them right, re-thinking modernists such as Rothko, Avery, Hartley, and Guston as well as Alex Katz. For instance, the iconography and narratives of *Yellow Dress* offer much to speculate about, but color

is an equal protagonist, underscored by the fact that the dress is actually more chartreuse than yellow—and is its own character study. Ditto for the diptych *All of Us*. Like *Yellow Dress*, it offers unorthodox interpretations of women as nurturers but it is also a heady study in pinks and reds. And the last room is in thrall to an array of heroic purples and other sensuous color combos, such as seen in the plummy *Couple No Shirts*. And let's not forget scale. These are some of Bradford's most monumental paintings to date and seem to indicate that she is heading off toward new, more assertive directions, even as she keeps her signature painterly lushness, her beguiling vulnerability.



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## CONTRIBUTOR

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