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Artspace

"Q&A 'I'm not going to fool around': An Interview with Painter Katherine Bradford"



Katherine Bradford. Image via Youtube.

At 77 years old, Katherine Bradford wakes up every morning grateful for (and a bit surprised with) her life as an artist. This life Bradford had to fight for—a fight that included divorcing a husband running for governor of Maine, and rejecting her role of supporting wife and stay-at-home mother (and not without protest).

Was it worth it? Yes: the proof is in the paint. Luminous, luscious, lollypop-colored paint that seems to glow on the canvas; vague figures often floating in space (sometimes outer space); emotion, and lots of it, that's hard to put your finger on. (Is it joy? Is it fear? Probably both.) Bradford is self taught and it shows. Not because her work is somehow lacking in skill or her approach to art history is somehow naive—but because the things that make her paintings great are things that cannot be learned.

Since showing her work with Canada (her first show with the New York gallery was in 2016), Bradford has seen a meteoric rise—and, the artist doesn't show signs of slowing down. On view now at London's Campoli Presti gallery is her solo show "Legs and Stripes," up until July 27. Here, we speak with the artist over the phone about the works on view, about what it was like to "come out" as an artist while living with a family unsympathetic to that, and about the social issues that Bradford feels is missing from the conversations surrounding her work.

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Where are you?

I'm in Maine, in Brunswick, where I come for the summer.

You used to live there full time, yes?

Right, but now I'm just here for the summer.

I read in an interview with Hyperallergic that you lived in Maine for many years as a "closeted" painter and that coming out as a gay person was easier than coming out as an artist. What did you mean by that? And what was so hard about being an artist?

What was so hard is that I already started out on the path of life being married to someone who expected me to help him with a very ambitious career. Right away we had two children; I had boy-girl twins. By the time I admitted to myself that I wanted to be, not just an artist, but a good artist, nothing was in place. I was living in Maine, we had a wood stove and an organic garden, and it took me a long time to turn my life around and live as an artist—including getting divorced. The big thing was that the grandmothers wanted me to be there raising the kids.



Katherine Bradford "Legs and Stripes" (installation view) at Campoli Presti, London. Courtesy of the artist and Campoli Presti, London / Paris

What made you take that leap to pursue a career as an artist? Was there a certain moment you can remember?

It wasn't a leap. It was one step after another. I hadn't been to art school and... Did you by any chance read the essay that my son wrote for the book that Canada published?

I haven't. I'm looking it up—it's called "How About a Little Bad-Ass Inspiration"?

That's it! He tells the story in quite an amusing way: about how nobody was really for me being an artist, and how it was kind of a crazy move. And then, it has a nice sweet ending about how proud they are that I actually did what I set out to do.

I remember reading an anecdote you told about a certain time your then-husband, who was running for governor at the time, invited some people involved in his campaign over for lunch...

... And I jumped out the window.

Yes! You decided you could play hostess for another luncheon and you jumped out the window and ran to your studio, which was in a barn.

I had sort of forgotten about that until my ex-husband started telling stories to the kids. [Laughs.] It's true, that story, and it's a good story because I was really hungry to change my life. I guess everybody can relate to that. Now I'm surrounded by an entire community of artists, and not too many of them had to fight as hard as I did to become an artist. And in a way, I think it's why I've stuck with it. When I wake up in the morning, I'm not going to fool around, I'm going to get to the studio. I'm not going to waste this opportunity because I know that it's very valuable—to me anyway.

Before you could really identify as an artist, when you were literally crawling out of the window to get to your studio, did you have friends who were artists? Were you part of a community?

Well that's the thing, and why I feel like I got a late start. I didn't really know what an artist was. I didn't really know that it was a full-time complete way to live your life. When I moved to Maine, I moved in the '70s with this guy who wanted to be governor. I started to meet artists—sort of hippie artists—and I saw what the whole thing was about. And then I realized: Ahh! That's what I want! You know, I feel really bad

about that whole thing, because I feel as though I agreed to the marriage on the premise that I would be a good wife for a politician and then I kind of broke the contract. And I feel badly about that.

In retrospect, though, don't you feel your family is grateful that you chose the path you chose? It seems like that was the conclusion you mentioned in the essay your son wrote.

I wouldn't say that. My kids, who don't really understand the art world, can see that there is something real about it. The grandmothers and that whole generation, are not alive; I'm sure they thought I was nuts the whole time. I mean, I did not talk to them about it.

I'm trying to think about how this all might have been different if you weren't a woman.

I thought about that. But if you were a guy and wanted to be an artist you were expected to support the family. What was very fortunate was that that wasn't an expectation for me. I have an older brother who is an architect and in a way I think he would have liked to be an artist, but that was not an option for him. He had to do something more practical.

So your brother is an architect and your grandfather was an architect. And I read that you grew up near Phillip Johnson's Glass House. I don't think it's too hard to look at your painting and see how your understanding of space might be influenced by architecture. Do you see your upbringing playing a role in how you approach painting?

I've thought back to think over my childhood and why I didn't catch onto my visual side sooner. I think my mother, being the daughter of an architect, was a very visual person. She had a really good color sense and she talked about what she was looking at all the time. The conversation in our household was often about visual things. For example, I remember her doing the dishes and she had all these Matisse postcards tacked up over the sink. I took that for granted, but now think back on it and that's what she loved and I think she passed that onto all of her kids. And the Phillip Johnson thing was important because my mother knew him and I went over there several times and I didn't forget it. I heard him talk about the decisions he made with that Glass House and I really thought that was interesting.

What did he say that stuck with you?

There's a little pond down the hill behind the house and he had this little pavilion built in the middle of the pond. I remember hearing him say that he deliberately changed the scale, he'd made it much smaller,

so that you had the illusion that it was farther away or something. I thought, who is this guy? He said he wanted to *play* with the scale. I had never heard a grown man talk about *playing* with the scale. I never forgot that.



Pavilion in the Pond, 1962, at the Glass House. Photo by Michael Biondo via Theglasshouse.org.

When you talked about the grandmothers thinking you were crazy were you talking about your mother (your children's grandmother) or your grandmother?

The grandmothers of my children, so my mother-in-law and my mother.

So even though your mother had a creative sensibility she never supported your creative side.

She was threatened by it. I think she thought being an artist meant that you would lead desolate life and she wanted other things for me, like all mothers. Mothers think they know what's going to make their children happy and they're wrong a lot of the time. I think being an artist has changed a lot since then, too. While I drive around I've been listening to the book *Ninth Street Women*. It's so marvelous; it's a portal into a whole era and things have changed so much. Those women were leading an extremely bohemian way of life, and I think my mother and her generation thought that was probably what it meant to be an artist, and they were threatened by it. That wasn't what she wanted for me.

When talking about your work you often mention confidence and vulnerability. I can see how these would be big issues for someone who wasn't supported by their family in what they were doing. But now, in these last few years, or decade really, you've seen success, you're showing your work a lot, your exhibition schedule has really ramped up, etc. I'm wondering if this success has led to more self-confidence in your painting and if so, how that's affected the work itself.

Definitely. You're right; it has. I give a lot of credit to Canada gallery, who have been so accepting and supportive of what I do. I realized that somebody liked my art; it was kind of a surprise. For both the shows I've had at Canada, they chose the riskier work, work they felt was most interesting, not necessarily salable. That was a real education for me. They encouraged risk-taking, and I began to believe in the way I paint, which is a little bit outsider-ish, a little bit folk, a little bit... well, you can supply the adjectives. I had

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thought all along that I had to become more skilled as an artist before I could enter the big-time. But in fact, it's turned out that... that's not true. (I don't know what skill is, skill kind of redefines itself.) But the support I got for the way I was painting was one of the biggest miracles that's happened to me in the last decade.

I want to talk about your current show at Campoli Presti. You're often concentrating on certain themes... ships, outer space, swimming and pools, super heroes... Your current show is called "Legs and Stripes," and unsurprisingly the work features a lot of legs and stripes. What drew you to this subject matter or this theme?

You know, it is a theme, but it doesn't get at the meaning of the paintings, which I think has been under discussed. I've noticed that people talk about the color a lot, which I think is what strikes people first, and that's good. And they talk about the light and the luminous quality. And you're mentioning theme; do you think that's the same as meaning?

I think, with your work in particular, that you're probably drawn to what we're calling "themes" that lend themselves formally to certain types of compositions, more so than offering specific narratives or literal content. So I imagine that, say, legs and stripes aren't interesting to you because of what they "mean" as much as they're useful to you as ways of organizing a canvas.

Right. Well I'd like there to be more interest in how the paintings effect people, not just formally. I feel that in this moment in the art world, people are responding to social and political issues. I want to be part of that conversation, but I don't think I am enough. So, I would say that one thing running through the Campoli show, which they did not mention, is that I'm doing people, but I'm really emphasizing a universality. I'm doing people that are somewhat androgynous, and they're all different colors. I have one painting called Group Portrait, which includes a super hero and a cat. I have two paintings which are somewhat about identity; they're figures with choices of different heads. I feel that's important, that I'm exploring who we are, how we fit in, how we fit in together visually, how we all stand next to each other, and there are quite a lot of options for how to look and be with one another. I'm interested in the community, and I love the community that you and I are in, which is full of really odd, different kinds of people. I really like that and I want to celebrate it.



Katherine Bradford, Choice of Heads, 2019. Acrylic on canvas. 80 x 68 inches.
Courtesy of the artist and Campoli Presti, London / Paris

I'm looking at Choice of Heads.

That's really kind of an absurd idea, right there.

There are arms reaching out to different heads, but then the heads could either be disembodied or their bodies could be off-canvas, because they're right at the edge of the painting. And then you have this other painting, Various Heads, where you have a variety of disembodied heads that are rendered not just in different colors but also painterly styles. I see what you're saying. But I also see stripes and legs dividing the canvas in a Rothko-style, color field-type reference.

That's definitely there. Maybe that's a little easier to talk about. Or maybe it's what people see first. Some people ask me if the Various Heads one is a self portrait because the woman could be me; she has white hair, which I have. I see it as perhaps a stand-in for me and all the options, all the options we could be, floating over her head: her choices. And there's another painting called Wedding Ceremony that I think people like because it's very colorful, but no one's really picked up on the fact that it's probably of two women. Maybe that's a little harder to swallow. It's two very similarly looking people.

I saw that. It's two people with long hair, that could be women. But also, mimicking that shape of their hair are these rainbow forms above, which call to mind the pride symbol.

Right. So it could be that. I think that I would like all these interpretations in play.



Katherine Bradford, *Various Heads*, 2019. Acrylic on canvas. 80 x 68 inches.
Courtesy of the artist and Campoli Presti, London / Paris

Would you consider or describe your painting as 'queer'?

Not in the sense that many queer artists make that the focus of their work. I don't see it as the focus of my work or my life, because I haven't been queer in that sense all my life. But I love that word 'queer' because to me, what makes artists and art so fascinating is that it tends to be an unconventional thought and it tends to undermine a standard idea. It's questioning the status quo, which I think is really great. Did you see Nicole Eisenman's piece in the Whitney Biennial, *Procession*?

Yes

I really thought they were wonderful and I related to them. There she put a whole lot of people together doing something. They're moving forward in a kind of awkward, certainly vulnerable way (they don't have clothes on). If you look at them closely you'll see she doesn't give them any gender. She's really having a lot of fun queering every single one of them. I thought she had exactly the right note; I thought it was so marvelous as opposed to some of the anger and earnestness that many artists get in their work who are trying to change things. Nicole was laughing her way through her procession, and each person in that was formally and visually so different one from another. But you couldn't really pin down what they were. And I thought: ahh, that's it. This is where I want my work to be.

You said a while ago that you looked towards Rose Wylie's work, especially the way that she depicts legs. That came to mind with this current show.

[Laughs.] Yes, you're right.

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And clearly Nicole Eisenman has an impact on you. Who else are you looking at? Are there any other influences you'd like to mention?

Yes. I like Robert Nava's very loose handling of how he puts on paint. He's a very young artist and he paints figures almost the way Cy Twombly would have had he painted figures. And I like Todd Bienvenu. He has a very humanist basis for everything he does. And in that sense I also like Lou Fratino's work. He does gay men, and they're so tender. They're so different than every other gay man's depiction of being a gay man. They're really emotional. And beautiful! So those three—who all happen to be much younger than me, and male—are people who are doing work that I would like to be thought of as part of.

To wrap up, is there anything coming up you'd like to mention?

Yes, I'll be showing in Paris at FIAC with both Canada and Presti Campoli. And I have a show coming up in Tokyo at a gallery called Tomio Koyama. I really appreciate your questions; they've been really good. Especially all that stuff about how I didn't become an artist very easily.

Oh good! It's been so great talking to you! And congrats on the new work.
