

## TWO COATS OF PAINT

“Katherine Bradford: Consoled and Consoler” Jacob Patrick Brooks, Two Coats of Paint. May 8 2021. <https://www.twocoatsofpaint.com/2021/05/katherine-bradford-consoled-and-consoler.html>

### Katherine Bradford: Consoled and consoler

*Contributed by Jacob Patrick Brooks*



Installation view of Katherine Bradford, Mother Paintings, Canada, New York, 2021

As a painter as well as a person, Katherine Bradford is cool and confident. Her work has been aloof and funny, and sweet when she wants it to be. It makes you feel charmed but a little distant and teased, as if to signify something just out of reach that you can't quite name. To an extent, her compelling new exhibition “Mother Paintings,” at Canada, continues in this vein.

The colors and brushwork radiate a sense of unrestrained joy in material, barely contained by the limits of the canvas. It's a delight to bounce from image to image, discovering the phantoms of older paintings just under a thin film of translucent pigment. A painting's history of trial and error is usually withheld from the viewer, its absence a hard-won, private victory. But Bradford is more generous with her struggle, and the work is better for it. In the context of her calm insouciance, the awkward aspects of her figures feel like exquisitely timed, deadpan quips.



Katherine Bradford, *Upsetting Times*, 2020, acrylic on canvas, 72 x 60 inches

What sets this show apart is that the people it depicts aren't only awkward and funny, but also frail and unsure. Some are carried, while others appear to be consoling one another, clutching anyone close for support. Everyone seems humbled, as if there's no longer any reason to gather around a bonfire or go for a swim. The paintings are placed to evoke the stations of the cross, establishing a loosely sequential narrative. Each scene seems to reflect a significant experience from two perspectives – that of the consoled and supported, then that of the consoler and supporter. They convey a genuine sense of wonder and curiosity that you might expect from an innocent toddler: why are things like this? The presumptive adult in the picture seems to answer as best she can, knowing there are no satisfying responses save for a momentary offer of safety.

Ghosts haunt the work. Inverted entities, just out of reach of their living neighbors, dare them to test the nature of their form, softly deterring desperate grasping. In *Upsetting Times*, a white, upside-down figure nestles between two commuters who appear enwrapped in their own lives, intensifying their atomization and loneliness. Even if such apparitions are not obvious to those they attend, their presence keeps them from looking, connecting, and sharing their emotional loads. Another specter appears in *Mother Joins the Circus – Second Version*. Again, it's upside-down, but this time just in front of three figures. Only the one being carried is opaque, which amplifies the sense of its heaviness, while those bearing the weight are weakly translucent. This makes for a mordant kind of Pietà: the spirit watches them do their best to help, but knows it may be too late.

The work that most clearly delivers the theme of the show is *Guest For Dinner*, in which a massive figure stands at the side of the canvas, notionally outside space and time, watching three separate sets of people share a meal. Neither solemn nor triumphant, she appears content to just soak in what looks like three generations in one another's company. It's a loving yet melancholy scene, and it's fitting that it comes at the end of the show.

"Mother Paintings" is a heartfelt meditation on raising other beings – children, paintings – and being raised oneself. Bradford also grapples with her own legacy and with the legacies of her predecessors, be they relatives or fellow artists, asking vital questions about what it means to be remembered and to leave a mark that seems small. Her work imparts a degree of purposeful sincerity that did not surface so abundantly in her previous work, and that isn't common in the art world. She has made a hard-earned transition from straight-faced, visual jokes to deep, anxious questioning. It's a valiant and moving achievement in the face of so much uncertainty.