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GOOD ENOUGH: KATHERINE BRADFORD'S MOTHER PAINTINGS AT CANADA



Katherine Bradford, Mother Joins the Circus - Second Version, 2021, Acrylic on canvas, 60 x 72 inches. Courtesy of the artist and CANADA, New York

KATHERINE BRADFORD: MOTHER PAINTINGS AT CANADA GALLERY

Alexi Worth moderated an ad hoc roundtable on the new social media Clubhouse May 13, under the auspices of Dumbo Open Studios in Two Coats of Paint publisher Sharon Butler's "room", in which he asked a few critics and artists to give shout outs for current shows that struck them as memorable and groundbreaking. This naturally gave rise to more general discourse on what constitutes anything so august. Blake Gopnik, distinguished former critic of the Washington Post and author of the recent Warhol biography, who offers a daily pic at his [website](#) and is thus to the manor born of bestowing aesthetic imprimatur, sounded a pessimistic view on art of significance in our moment, suggesting that like the waning days of mannerism before the advent of the baroque, or the (to his mind) benighted year 1895, art is treading water: lots of people do fine stuff but there is nothing truly important happening.

Well, I beg to differ, and would offer as singular proof of a multiple truth my own clarion choice, Katherine Bradford, whose show at CANADA, her third at that gallery since 2016, closes tomorrow. Grab your vax certificates and don't let niceties of social distancing prevent you from seeing art history in the making. A show by Bradford, an artist at the height of her powers, is an event. Gopnik would have a point still if one could say that a solo show of new work by Bradford either breaks into a new genre for this mythopoeically heartfelt narrator in paint, but within what one would call the artist's trademark painterly idiom, or intensifies that idiom exponentially but in reference to familiar motifs or tropes. But Bradford is not that kind of artist. Each of her three CANADA presentations constitutes a chapter in an unfolding chronicle in which form and content are mutually embedded in one another.

er 2016 CANADA debut, "Fear of Waves", put bathers into the cosmos amidst shooting star dabs and drips; these images managed to evoke Bonnard, Cézanne, Hödler, Chagall and Milton Avery, all with a native Mainer's earthy humor and a Williamsburg habitué's cunning iconoclasm. There is actually a bit of me that feels oafish speaking about Bradford's profundity not because she lacks it, one iota, but because she is so funny as an image maker, so salty, so unpretentious, that it feels like a betrayal of mood to write in terms that she nonetheless commands. It would be exalting Cardy B in language suited to Bob Dylan. But what can one do: these women are geniuses?

"Friends and Strangers," her 2018 solo spot, not only moved to dry land, leaving the swimming pool in outer space and grounding characters in complex social interactions; it accentuated the themes of distention,

distortion and elongation while following a less pictorial and more figural logic in determining tensions of space and color. A levitating personage is held afloat by vintage rocket engines, a raucous collision of the ethereal and the steam punk.

You (or Blake Gopnik) might want to say, OK so her pictorial language and thematics shift from show to show, but aren't these just the incremental meanderings of any lively artist's career? For sure, the sensibility is always, unmistakably, Bradford. A humorous humanism, a narrative feeling for color, an AbEx manipulation of forms until a composition gels: these constitute her *modus operandi*. But each turn is simultaneously two turns, of subject and style, and a combined turn in a direction, an insight, in which the artist's restless search over five decades has not yet taken her. When the arc of her career is scrutinized, this is an artist, it emerges, disinclined towards repetition even as she digs deeper into familiarities.

And then comes the Mother paintings. I'm one of those gallery goers who reads the press release after seeing the show, not to allow gallerists (or even the artist) to police my reactions. What I saw on the walls were people, familiars, groups, relations, support systems. Unlike the levitator from "Friends and Strangers," a supine old woman has no invisible or magical means of transport; she is carried by two all-too-human, dedicated ladies, who are most certainly not assisted by a ghostly, inverted third. There seems to be an elderly balding bloke in one painting looking particularly gormless in a cocktail dress. He bestows an ambivalent gaze upon three scrubbed-out gatherings around tables that somehow read as hieroglyphs of distressed communality. More strikingly inventive but with no gratuitous stylization in evidence is a riff on the elongations in the last show which now have an anatomical-cum-psychological function, arms that reach further than nature intended so that a figure can embrace, or at least lay claims to, other figures beyond her singular reach. When we learn that the paintings depict "mother" it makes sense; unlike many-armed Indian goddesses, Maine earth mothers have, instead of multiple arms, the ordinary two, it's just that they're longer. In *Mother's Lap*, (2020) the larger-than-life maternal form is like a chunk of furniture, a right-angled entity, recalling for me Henry Moore's madonnas which follows simultaneously vertical and horizontal thrusts; and like Moore, Bradford's mothers are also hieratic and naturalistic, schematic and tender, in ways that elide the distinction between archetype and real human presence.

The English child psychologist D.W. Winnicott famously observed that what he found in his waiting room was not mothers and children but singular units of mother-child. This shouldn't be understood as misogynist; he fully understood that the mother, as an adult, had a life apart, but the child is helplessly anchored in this duo. Winnicott formulated a theory of the environment-individual set up, a complex dynamism that at once entails and belies individuality. Without setting out to illustrate any textbook theories, Bradford's painterly approach seems to mirror, or vindicate, this way of seeing while developing suitably non-binary scenarios of maternal support as befits an LGBT-icon who is also a mother and grandmother.

But *Object Relations* notwithstanding, in my pre-press release exposure to Bradford's show I found myself luxuriating in a formal duality that has nothing immediately or obviously to do with motherhood. Color blazes in this show like never in Bradford's oeuvre. Just to take the last three shows, 'Waves' had the almost ecclesiastical purples of night skies, while "Friends," with its lemon and lime grounds, was weighted towards mustards and almost 1950s pinks. But color here has the ferocious autonomy of *tachisme* or art informel or Hans Hofmann at his most chromatically impertinent. And yet, as much as colors sing in their singularity, the tonality in Bradford is an equally powerful force in these paintings. The bold, emphatic contrasts in *Bus Stop* (2020) of both gender and hue – the discs of the female's breasts, the alternating pink and yellow of the man's pants – evolve amidst scruffy, distressed canvas-and-ground-baring scumble; if her color here is almost conceptual – as in the idea of such and such a color – her tones are contingent, mired, grounded, incremental.

Such is the purposiveness of every formal decision in Bradford, however, that this duality of chroma and tone actually feels like it has symbolic weight; one that's tethered to another duality, the archetypal and the all-too-human, that pervades her explorations of motherhood, of mother-offspring relations, mother-father, mother-environment. But this is not conceptual art. It is not a grand scheme of dualities and counterweighted abstractions. Bradford is about tentative, exploratory, possible, intuited meanings and values. Winnicott's best known concept – again, not antifeminist (says this male critic!) – was the notion of the "good enough mother". By this he meant the human mother whose "failings" are a gift to the growing child. In the same spirit, let's say of Bradford's *Mother Paintings*, groundbreaking and significant not simply for Bradford but for everyone who cares about painting and has or had a mother, that these are good enough masterpieces.