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KATHERINE BRADFORD: MOTHER PAINTINGS



Katherine Bradford, Motherhood, 2021, Acrylic on canvas, 80 x 68 in (203 x 172.72 cm), Courtesy of the artist and CANADA. New York

Years ago, a pregnant friend told me a surprising fact about the lives of mammals: The womb is a very loud place to be. Imagine the hurtling crush of Niagara Falls, a rushing noise created by the reverberation of blood-flow and viscera inside the torso. This new information floored me, since I'd assumed that the prenatal ooze resembled a sensory deprivation tank, floaty and serene. Contrary to the gendered softness of motherhood—a social construct that's all pink, downy, and dulcet-toned—the reality is vaster and more intense.

I share this biological digression because similar tensions course through the 11 works in "Mother Paintings," Katherine Bradford's third solo show at Canada. These paintings are expansive yet intimate, alienated yet comforting, unexpected and even funny. In the series, unremarkable interpersonal vignettes, from embracing on a couch to waiting at a bus stop, are rendered at the watery edge that separates figuration from abstraction. Bradford's biomorphic forms cohere into human shapes—but just barely. A rectangular splash of ochre becomes a mother's lap, while brushy peninsulas form the fingers of an outstretched hand. There is no depth of ground in these scenes, only flatness, figures set in planes of color.

As the show's title, "Mother Paintings" invites a certain comparison. Namely, mothers and paintings are both susceptible to archetypal metaphors. The options are endless: Mothership, Mother Russia, kombucha mother (that gooey fungal mass), and the classic, "Tell me about your mother." Figural painting is by its nature a metaphor: an image that stands in for some recognizable thing. The symbolism quickly lapses into corniness. Paintings, like mothers, have to do with the idea of creation and emergence—of entering into being.

But of course, I'm over-analyzing it. (This is the problem with metaphors!) "No, I wasn't thinking of motherhood so much," Bradford said to me over the phone. "I was thinking of *maternal feelings*." In particular, Bradford wanted this show to engage with the world-altering year that was 2020. "This is the first time that I wanted my paintings to relate to outside events." This newfound instinct to create a tether between her paintings and the outside world marks a shift, a pushback against the principles of abstraction in which Bradford situates her practice. At its most orthodox, abstract painting demands that art be self-sufficient as such, freed from the yoke of an external referent. While current events may be new terrain for Bradford, her past work also represented people, albeit at the hovering margin where representation blurs into unmediated paint on canvas.

Bradford is frank in describing her ambivalence—or as she put it, her embarrassment—about reintroducing human figures into her abstract practice some years ago. “Sometimes I ask myself what [Mark] Rothko would make of what I'm doing, whether he would be really disgusted that I put [the human figure] back in. Because that was a triumph for a lot of painters to get rid of the figure.”

Whatever Rothko might say, Bradford's cleverness and empathy punctuate the discourse of pure painting. These works convey a mood, induced through color and line and sustained by scenes of sympathetic (if sometimes cloddish) humans yearning for one another. What could be more fitting to 2020 than works about closeness, longing, and craving for touch? Bradford notably did not receive much critical or commercial attention until her mid-70s, and as a single mother to boot, she is no stranger to the battering tides of uncertainty. From the womb into adulthood, it's a very noisy ocean in which we all bob around, reaching for the comfort of those nearby.

—*Lucy Hunter*