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Katherine Bradford



Portrait of Katherine Bradford in her Brooklyn studio. Photographed by Rosie Osborne in 2020

This interview begins with an essay written by Arthur Bradford, Katherine's son, in 2016.

In 1980 my mother moved from rural Maine to NYC with two young children and she slept on a pull-out couch in the living room while attending art-school and working nights. She wanted to make a real and lasting mark on the art world. Now, some 36 years later, this is actually happening.

Here she is in 1985, a dedicated painter, and single mother of two. After she would get us off to school, she'd commute up to the state university in Purchase, NY to pursue her MFA in painting.



Katherine Bradford in 1985

Many of us carry dreams like my mother did back then, but we find them harder to hold onto as financial and logistical realities set in. So too do the harsh preferences of our artistic culture. New and emerging artists are supposed to be young, we are told. That's where the cutting edge lives. By most accounts, my mother got a late start on things. She was over 40 by the time she got her MFA.

Undaunted, she rented a studio in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, then a working class Polish neighborhood and worked downstairs from her friend Chris Martin, also a painter working to establish himself in the NYC art world.

As children, my sister and I would sometimes attend art shows with our mother, snatching chips and cheese off the tables, wondering why she cared so much about those paintings on the walls. We were proud of her when she began to have shows of her own, usually group shows at smaller galleries, often outside of the coveted landscape of New York City.

And I suppose when we went off to college she felt a sense of freedom. She could devote herself to her work in a way that wasn't possible before. I'd come home to visit her in the 90's and she'd tell me about the new breed of young people wandering around that Williamsburg neighborhood where she now owned a loft studio. Every morning, when she wasn't teaching art, she would rise early and ride the subway out to that studio. She'd stay there until late at night, cooking her meals on a hotplate, returning home with paint-splattered hands.

She kept up this routine for years, unwavering. She turned 50, then 60, and while she saw certain successes, we could tell she wasn't satisfied. She'd speak of the difficulty of getting a gallery owner's attention in a world populated by young up and comers, the very students she'd spent time teaching were now out there making their own marks, passing her by, even.

About the time she turned 70, my mother eased up on her teaching, but she didn't ease up on her art. In fact, she painted with more focus and fury. She took on bigger canvases and made bolder statements.

And lo and behold, the art world began to take notice. This winter my sister and I flew to NYC to witness her big solo show opening at the venerable Canada gallery in Lower Manhattan. What a feeling it was to see this huge space overflowing, packed with people, all crowding in to catch a glimpse of our hardworking mother and her paintings. Every piece in the show sold within minutes. I could've cried seeing this dream come true.

Yes, she is now making her mark, the one she had set out to make so long ago when she left Maine for NYC with us kids in tow. What I find especially remarkable about this turn of events is that the work we are celebrating is her most recent paintings, the art she has made in the past couple of years. Her work has always been good, but she's had some kind of breakthrough lately. She's getting better, more vital, and more vibrant at an age when many of us choose to step back and relax.

Yes, she's kicking ass in her seventies. And it's here that I hope you'll take some inspiration from this story. Perhaps you are an aspiring artist yourself. Perhaps you struggle to balance the rigors of raising children with finding a creative edge. It's hard, and not always rewarding. But what a wonderful dream it would be for us all to know that if we stick to it, and work hard, we'll actually find our groove down the line, and get recognized for it to boot. What a wonderful dream it would be to imagine that those kids we are now raising and cursing and cuddling might someday gather around us and say, "Wow, so this is what it was all about." How nice it would be to know that we might one day make our children, and those we love, so proud.



Katherine Bradford, *Fathers*, 2016, acrylic on drop cloth



Katherine Bradford's studio in Brooklyn. Photographed by Rosie Osborne in 2020.

What's your earliest memory?

There were four children in our family, all very close together. It was lots of fun, it was very noisy. I have an early memory of when my parents went off on a vacation. While they were away, I got all of my brothers and sisters to make a scroll, done on shelf paper - this big poster that said '*Welcome home Mom and Dad!*'. I wasn't encouraged at all to make art, or to be an artist when I was young, but I remember that.



Katherine Bradford's studio in Brooklyn. Photographed by Rosie Osborne in 2020.

Was there an artist in particular who had a profound effect on you when you were young?

Yes. When I was in my 20's, I was going to go to Mexico with my brother, but we missed the plane. We ran over to the Museum of Modern Art and saw this fabulous Matisse show. It was so vivid and so colourful. The next day, we took the plane to Mexico. Compared to New York City, Mexico is just awash in wonderful, colourful clothing and art. I think the two together... well, I'll never forget that. It didn't occur to me that I should spend my life making art though. I didn't make the commitment to being a serious artist until I was 30.



Katherine Bradford's studio in Brooklyn. Photographed by Rosie Osborne in 2020.



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In a past interview, you mention the following incredible anecdote:

'I was living in Maine year-round in the 1970s. I had two children, and an ambitious husband, who basically wanted to be governor of Maine. When I realized the implications of that, I thought, "This is going to be a train wreck." I didn't want to get divorced, but I didn't think I could be the first lady in the governor's mansion. One day, my husband invited some colleagues over for lunch, and I told him I just couldn't hack it. I didn't want to be there for one more lunch. So, when the people came down the driveway to our home, I jumped out a window and ran to my studio.'

Strangely enough, this was a story I'd completely forgotten until my children recently asked me if it were true. Apparently they'd heard it from my ex-husband. I thought that was a curiously poignant way for that story to resurface. Actually I find it hard to believe I actually jumped out a window. but I did.

It must have been a difficult realisation...

I was married, and I had boy-girl twins. It was actually just what I wanted, only I also wanted to be an artist. I was sorry that it led to divorce... It was a moment of realising what an artist was, and that it was an entire way of life, and a way of going through life. That's what I wanted.



Katherine Bradford's studio in Brooklyn. Photographed by Rosie Osborne in 2020.

So what happened after that?

It was the 70's and I was living in Maine. There were a lot of people moving to Maine that we would call 'hippies'. It was a wonderful time. That's when I started painting, very informally. There were a lot of poets, dancers, performance artists. We would all get together and listen to the poets read their poems. If you made art, you could put it on the wall. So I always associated making art with poetry. I didn't see it as a way to protest, or a way to change the world; to affect political and social issues. I saw it purely as a way to be part of a community of poets and painters.



Katherine Bradford, Pool, Red Rim, 2017, acrylic on canvas

Did you ever write poetry yourself?

I would love to be a poet, but I realise it's as complex really as painting... I don't think I could take that on. I have written some poems, and I guess they're not very good. It's really vast.



Katherine Bradford's studio in Brooklyn. Photographed by Rosie Osborne in 2020.

You often talk about being part of a community of artists - is that an important element of your practice?

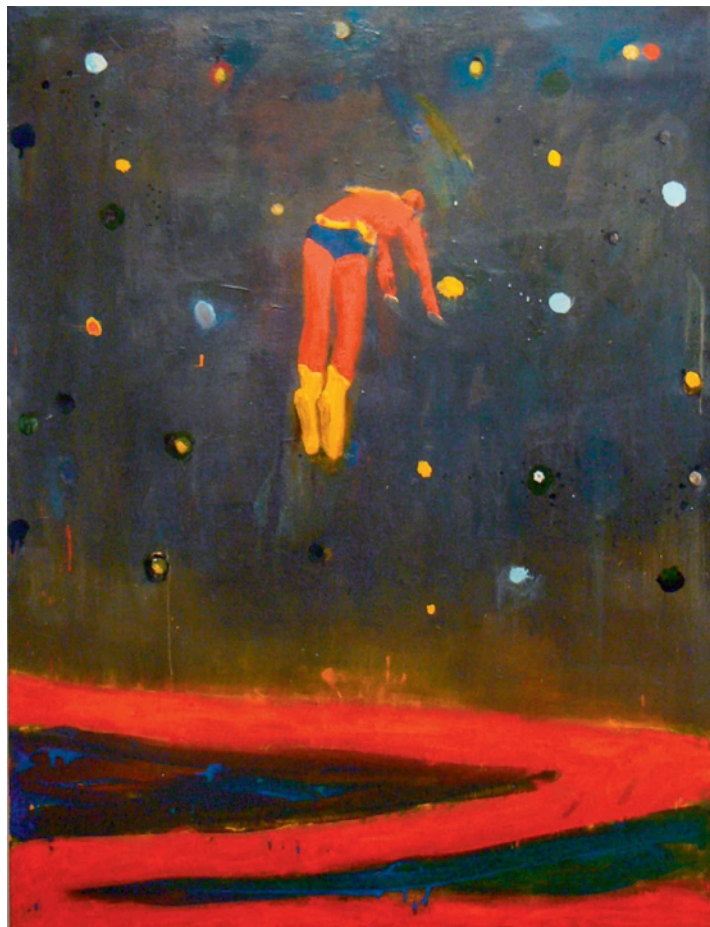
I love being part of a group of like-minded people. It's really what has kept me going all these years. The painter Todd Bienvenu for example, he used to come over and stretch my paintings. You know, he could do it so fast, his arms were so strong, he could stretch dozens of paintings in a day, very quietly and quickly. I love the way he paints.

If you could get any artist from history to paint your portrait, who would you choose?

I like what Alice Neel does. She puts so much personality into her paintings. I can see why she might have been dismissed early on as a caricaturist as she includes the personalities so heavily, but I think now that's appreciated about her work. You look at the people she paints and you know exactly who they are. They're characters from her life.

If you could take any artist from history for dinner tonight in New York, who would you choose?

When I go to restaurants in New York, they're so noisy! I'd like to take a really lively one who would talk and listen... so that knocks out Marsden Hartley, who's one of my favourite artists. I'm not sure he'd be a lively dinner companion, I could be wrong! So someone like Philip Guston I think. I don't really know any painter who doesn't admire him a lot. I think it's the way he uses paint. It's so daring.



Katherine Bradford, Superman Responds, Night, 2011, oil on canvas

If you could have any work from history on your wall, by any artist, which one painting would you choose?

I think it might be a Matisse. Do you think they'd let me have that? Maybe that painting of Notre Dame, which is so spare. It's such a modern painting, it's so abstract. Matisse left it in what many would call an 'unfinished state'. But he believed in it, and I would hope that if it was on my wall I could learn that kind of confidence. Plus the colours are great.



Henri Matisse, Une Fin d'Après-midi, 1902

Is there an object here in your studio that means something to you in particular?

I have a few little talismans around that I put on the columns. You see, there's a very small painting over there that I made this summer that says 'protect your inner life'. I certainly don't want to sell it - I made it because I needed to have that message. I usually don't write on my paintings. Recently, I was asked, the way many of us are now, to respond to the political events going on. The worst thing to me is that our thoughts have been co-opted by the media and we all sit around and talk about the news, and we really should be protecting our inner life. I sort of resent how much the news events, the election, the whole thing, has taken over. In the studio here, it's important that I can relax and let myself do anything. It was very helpful that I

could paint the furniture in here. You have the brush in your hand and you're not stopping yourself, you're not being too precious. You just sort of paint whatever you want.



Katherine Bradford's studio in Brooklyn. Photographed by Rosie Osborne in 2020.

Do you ever paint from dreams, or do you dream about painting?

I've noticed when people write about my work that they often use words such as 'dream-like' or 'other worldly'. I don't remember my dreams well enough to paint them. I think when I'm painting well in here, I'm in what I call 'a zone'. I don't turn on any music, I keep it very quiet in here and I don't have an assistant. There's no one else around, so I can get pretty deeply into the zone, where thoughts come in, and I don't have to worry about what I'm going to do next. I hope that doesn't stop.



Katherine Bradford, Storm at Sea, 2016, acrylic on canvas

What are the most valuable lessons that you have learnt after all of the different experiences you've lived through?

Well, I think I've gotten much more confident in what I make, that there's something worthy about it. I really didn't believe that for a long time. And you know why, because maybe there wasn't something worthy about it! It has taken me a long time to do the kind of paintings that I wanted to do. A long time. I notice that there are some young artists that start right out being very good, and probably believe in what they're doing. But I don't know if I could have done it any faster, I think it took all of those years.



Katherine Bradford's studio in Brooklyn. Photographed by Rosie Osborne in 2020.

Almost as if the journey was as important as the destination?

Well, yes, there's that, because I certainly had a very good time. Little things would happen, and they'd be so exciting, like the first time I had a painting in a museum - it was just thrilling. All that kind of stuff. But, my friends would tell me that they liked a certain painting, and I thought they were crazy, I thought they really didn't know anything.

Do you think it was self-belief? Or was it curiosity? What do you think was driving you?

I think what was driving me was to make that painting that I *did* believe in. And you know, that's a lifelong thing. So I still have to come here every day, to do that. Like you, I like to take pictures with my iPhone. So when I take the subway back to Manhattan, I click through my pictures, and I think how much better the paintings could be, if I could only have one more day! One more day and I could fix them. And thank goodness I get to come back for one more day.



Katherine Bradford's studio in Brooklyn. Photographed by Rosie Osborne in 2020.

You talk about your practice with such a refreshing sense of gratitude and thankfulness - that you get to be living out this life as an artist. It's as if you're very aware of how...

Wonderful this is? Yes, I am.



Katherine Bradford, Yellow Suit Diver, 2014