



Beem, Edgar Allen. "Edgar Allen Beem." *The Portland Phoenix*, 22 June 2022, <https://portlandphoenix.me/woman-flying-maine-artist-katherine-bradford-is-going-like-60-at-80/>.

## **'Woman Flying:' Maine artist Katherine Bradford is going like 60 at 80**

Katherine Bradford is both one of the most respected artists in New York and a mainstay of the Maine art community. Any list of the most important artists working in Maine today would have to include her.

Art critic Roberta Smith of The New York Times wrote of Bradford's highly successful 2021 exhibition at Canada, an artist-run gallery in New York, that her paintings "reflect a veteran artist in top form."

Now, the Portland Museum of Art is featuring a Bradford exhibition as its major summer show.

"Flying Woman: The Paintings of Katherine Bradford" (June 25-Sept. 11) features 47 of Bradford's paintings from 1999 to the present. "Woman Flying," the 1999 painting that inspired the show's title, is now in the PMA collection. It depicts a nude, red-caped woman trying to fly. That's what Bradford has been doing for more than 40 years and she has succeeded. At 80, she is going like 60.

When I first met Bradford she was married, living in Brunswick, and raising twins Arthur and Laura, born in 1969. In 1975, she was a founding member of the Union of Maine Visual Artists with Maury Colton, David Brooks, Natasha Mayers, Stephen and Mark Petroff, Pat Owen, Carlo Pittore, and Abby Shahn.

"The community up here is very lively and I love being part of it," says Bradford, who credits her Maine colleagues with helping to launch her career. "The Maine art community is a great place to start. It's very open, democratic, collegial. You can say anything, make any kind of art."



"Woman Flying," the 1999 painting by Katherine Bradford that inspires the title of the summer exhibition of her work at the Portland Museum of Art. (Courtesy PMA)

In 1979, Bradford's large acrylic collage "The Children's Playground" was one of the stars of the All Maine Biennial at the Bowdoin College Museum of Art, the first of a series of biennial exhibitions of contemporary Maine artists. That year Bradford's marriage ended in divorce and she took her 10-year-old twins to New York City with her as she embarked on a new life.

A 2019 painting entitled "Mother Joins the Circus" (not in the PMA show) depicts a woman, stiff as a board, being carried by a man and a woman. Only after the fact did Bradford realize that it might be related to her pursuit of a New York art career.

"I just thought it was a great phrase," Bradford says. "Then I realized, this is what my children thought I did."

Bradford reinvented, or perhaps rediscovered herself, as an artist after her marriage ended. She went to graduate school, taught, painted, and fell in love with a woman, all the while raising her twins, one now an attorney, the other a writer. She also found a place where she belonged.

"I was one of the first artists to move to Brooklyn," she explains. "In the '80s a bunch of us moved to Brooklyn. We supported each other and made friends. I duplicated what I had in Maine. Becoming part of the community in Brooklyn was vital."

The critical success Bradford has had in New York is in part a function of her bold, blunt figurative style being more urban than rural.

"The Maine art world is kind of conservative," Bradford says. "I was at a disadvantage because I wasn't a skillful artist. The farther away I get from New York, the less respect I get."

When Bradford says she is not a "skillful artist," she means she is not a precision realist. Her paintings have a childlike simplicity that is more truthful than exact. Her art belongs to the abstract figuration tradition of painters such as Matisse, Picasso, Hartley, DeKooning, and Guston.

Bradford's imagery in "Flying Woman" runs from ships and boats to swimmers, superheroes, fliers, and mothers and families. The mother images are coincident with the coronavirus pandemic. Bradford's figures are colorful and crude, as much paint as person.

"I feel my people are vulnerable and exposed. That's a great emotional state to paint about," Bradford says. "I think of them as characters. I probably was doing ships as a precursor to people. I started painting superheroes because I wanted more color. Painting red boots and red underpants was great. I needed those colors."

Bradford paints intuitively, usually not knowing what she is going to paint until she finishes painting it.

"An artist's mind needs to be freed up. You have to be able to tap into whimsy, nonsense, the illogical," Bradford says. "Having fresh absurd ideas is valuable to an artist. It's mysterious. That's important."

What fascinates Bradford is not something "out there," not some external referent, but what happens on the surface of a painting once she starts applying paint. She paints the way some

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novelists write, following the narrative of marks on a blank surface, exploring the mysteries of imagination, perception, and dreams.

“Maybe we have to make things so we know what is inside us,” Bradford says. “We pull things out. Isn’t that what Philip Guston did? I think that’s what I do.”