

BROOKLYN RAIL

Kalm, James. "Katherine Bradford." *The Brooklyn Rail*, Feb. 2005, <https://brooklynrail.org/2005/02/artseen/katherine-bradford>.

Katherine Bradford

Ether Nights is the title of this exhibition of recent paintings by Katherine Bradford, and one of the overarching themes is the idea of illumination, enlightenment, or the bringing forth from darkness. In these compositions, Bradford is not only devising images that use the physical presence of light as a feature player, but she creates narrative metaphors reflective of a spiritual or intellectual enlightenment as well.

Katherine Bradford is an artist who is in it for the long haul, which is not to say that longevity is a prime reason for appreciating the work of an artist. But in our current circumstances, publicity is being generated by the blog-full about dealers picking up young artists before they even finish grad studies. This gives one pause to contemplate the possibility of significant art coming from anyone over 30. For the connoisseur, the attraction of a long corpus is the chance to witness changes and developments in practice and attitude over "the long haul," though the market seems to discourage any changes once a "signature style" has been established.

After seeing a 20-year-old painting in a public collection in Boston last summer, I asked Bradford what had brought about the changes from the "serious abstraction" of that work, and the new more whimsical figurative pieces represented in this show. Perhaps to avoid limiting interpretation, or maybe just being cagey, she replied that even the early abstract pieces were based on natural objects or forms. Possibly like the figure in "Traveler" (2004) who stands in a canoe, back to the viewer, sailing off on a pale yellow river towards an orange orb as if in search of an unknown goal, these pictures represent a kind of search for enlightenment themselves.

A row of a half dozen pastel slide projectors abuts the right edge of another painting. Their rays of light beaming through the mist of a Prussian blue nocturne to illuminate clouds, this light could represent the intellectual will, and its attempt to project its desires on the evanescent components of nature. In this case the eye is not just the receiver of light but also its transmitter, an apparatus that illuminates so as to perceive.



Katherine Bradford, "Lake Sisters" (2004), mixed media on panel.

A native of Maine, Bradford also relishes subjects that have been employed in various senses by other artists who have lived and worked in Maine. Winslow Homer often pictures people in canoes, but his figures are in the mundane pursuit of trout or moose. Bradford's quarry appears to be travelers on a quest in a sea of brilliant sunshine. Marsden Hartly captures the coast with a directness and simplicity of a salty splash in the face. Bradford's coast is more ethereal, dark, mysterious. Waves morph between abstract signs and phantom vapors of thinned turpentine washes. Bathers with nonplussed expressions, as flat as cardboard cutouts, are a specialty of Alex Katz. Bradford's swimmers seem more vulnerable, their forms massed together for support in the deep dark waters. This combining of New England romantic realism with transparent fields of zippy new age color and subversive figuration seems like trying to pound a square peg through a round hole. Bradford coaxes the combination through the child like directness and the facility of a slippery brush.

In several of the smaller paintings, the artist uses a technique that seems a combination of some type of photo-transfer and over-painting. The effect enhances the mystery and evokes questions of image making. When asked to explain how she did it, Bradford just smiled, knowing that some times avoiding enlightenment encourages viewers to provide their own illumination.