



Stopa, Jason. "In Conversation: Jason Stopa Interviews Katherine Bradford." *NY Arts Magazine*, 7 July 2011, <https://nyartsmagazine.net/in-conversation-jason-stopa-interviews-katherine-bradford/>.

In Conversation: Jason Stopa Interviews Katherine Bradford

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Jason Stopa: I like that your paintings seem to hover somewhere between the imaginary and the real. In a sense, they arrive at third space that is akin to a dream-like state. Can you tell me how you arrived at painting this way?

Katherine Bradford: My early paintings were abstract; I thought of myself as a mark maker. Letters and symbols began to appear and when they started to resemble boats or furniture, for example, I just let them be rather than painting them out. From there it was a quick step to figuration. However, I've been agonizing over how to put people in my paintings without betraying my abstract roots. There seems to be an unprecedented fluidity between abstraction and figuration right now with some artists showing both kinds of work simultaneously. Joe Bradley's recent exhibits at Canada and at Gavin Brown are a good example.

JS: Yeah, I think the door is wide open now, which is interesting. Does your work derive from photographic resources, observation, or somewhere else? How does this affect your decision making when painting?

KB: As I'm lying down the paint the images emerge. That's why I end up with so many water scenes. The paint starts to look like a sea or a river when I brush it on. De Kooning thought oil paint was made to paint flesh but for me it creates glints of light hitting the surface of water. However, at any instant the whole painting can turn from being an expanse of sea to being a vast field of grass. What I want is to access the creative power of the unconscious, the poetic imagination.

JS: I enjoy that there is something poetic and even mysterious to your images. We live in such a hyper rational time period, yet I believe that a purely scientific outlook falls short when it attempts to consider our most existential yearnings. What relationship do these images have to dreams or memory? Do certain motifs reappear from time to time?

KB: Even though I give myself permission to paint anything I want, certain motifs keep reappearing, which is like our dreams I suppose. On the other hand, it may be the water scenes that have made me paint so many boat and swimmer paintings. Once I saw a faint white iceberg appear in the paint and that started a long series of Titanic paintings. The confrontation between the ship and the iceberg is a fabulously visual event: man versus nature, small versus big, black versus white, rectangle next to pyramid.

JS: Many of the works seem infused with some kind of emanation. What is the role of light and color in these works?

KB: Emanation. Oh, I love that word. I'm going to use that from now on. To myself, I call the emanations "ray lines." This is really the fun part of making a painting: you can invent things the eye can't actually see, like colored light billowing out of a hole. As a girl growing up Catholic, I saw lots of streaming halo pictures: there would be "emanations" coming out of Christ's hands. Early Renaissance art is also full of this kind of pictorial license. I include these things because I want a mystical tone to my work—not an earnest tone, but rather a hopeful, light-filled, almost Disney kind of place.

JS: Well put, it's so hard to describe that kind of mystical place too. When you were talking about fluidity and water earlier it made me think of this painting you have called Welcome. It really seems to capture a sense of floating, or those states of mind in between waking and dreaming where all you have left is some fuzzy after-image. It seems to me the way memory works, the idea of things coming together and simultaneously falling apart. Antonio Damasio calls the act of perception in the mind the proto-self, where there is a coherent collection of neural patterns which map, moment-by-moment, the state of a physical organism. For him, when we recall an image we are actually involved in this mental re-re-mapping of an organism. The mind pieces it back together again as if seeing it for the first time. Does this resonate at all with your thought process or painting process?

KB: Once when Phong Bui was in my studio he said, "Kathy, you don't really want your paintings to make sense do you?" This was very helpful because I was starting to combine all sorts of disparate images in the same painting and to use various painting languages simultaneously. When I'm actively painting, I try to get in a kind of zone where my rational brain doesn't take over. Chris Martin calls it a "dance." He told me once we should put paint on with the same instinct that we'd use to jump out of the way of an on coming truck; in other words, to rely on deep seeded reflexes. Sometimes I try to become beast-like in the studio and rely on what I'm guessing are animal instincts. Maybe this is all just another way of addressing the neural patterns you are speaking about.