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No More Garden Variety Avant-Garde Has-Beens



Katherine Bradford's "At Home" (2011), oil on canvas, 80" x 68", and "New Men" (2011), oil on canvas, 80" x 60" (all images courtesy Edward Thorp Gallery)

Before focusing on Kathy Bradford's exhibition of new paintings at the Edward Thorp Gallery, I want to mention Eric Fischl's recent paintings and the second coming of the Titanic, both oddly relevant for their irrelevance.

Back in the 1980s, Fischl was a celebrated member of the Neo-Expressionist movement. Fast forward thirty years, and he's become an insignificant period artist content to make extraneous paintings, while other painters who also were beginning to exhibit in the heated transition of the late 1970s and early 80s have slowly but steadily gained a depth to their work. (Full disclosure: I both wrote the first cover article on Fischl for *Artforum* and was critical of his work a few years later in the pages of the same magazine).

I didn't think Fischl could do worse than his bullfighting paintings, based on his clichéd photographs, but I was wrong. (Never one to underestimate his genius, the artist believes this body of work connects him to Goya, Picasso and Hemingway). In his trenchant review of Fischl's "portraits" of his Hollywood friends and others at Mary Boone in the *New York Times* (March 1, 2012), Ken Johnson pointed out that "Fischl has displayed a remarkable obliviousness to possible perceptions of his work." According to Johnson, this ignorance began around 2000 — more than a decade ago. Since then, Fischl has only gotten more disconnected, until he seems smugly satisfied with exhibiting generically composed portraits of his star power friends, which is his way of name dropping as well as showing off.

Mainstream society continues to pay attention to spectacle and surface, but was it ever otherwise? Was it different back in 1997 when Celine Dion sang the hit songs on the soundtrack for James Cameron's ridiculously sappy blockbuster, *Titanic*, which is getting to sail again, in case you hadn't heard? Will the 3D revival allow Dion to build an addition to her backyard swimming pool, which holds 500,000 gallons of water? (Yes, that number is correct.)

Dion is another one of those insensible individuals who is arrogant and pathetic through and through. Perhaps Fischl will paint a portrait of Dion and her family lounging by the pool. Maybe Tiger Woods, another Jupiter Island resident, will drop by for a visit. Maybe Fischl will take a photograph of this gathering for a painting in his next show. (Yawn).

With her first show at Edward Thorp in 2007 (this is her second), Kathy Bradford joined a generation of women painters who have come into their own after they turned fifty and, in some cases sixty (Suzan Frecon, Judith Linhares and Joyce Pensato are three others who come to mind). Their presence argues for a thorough reevaluation of the canonical thinking that has prevailed in America since the early days of Pop Art. That bankrupt narrative, based on the rather flimsy, narcissistic assumption that the art world got it right the first time, with its own obsession with surface and spectacle, leaves little room for the quiet adventurousness and formal variety of these artists' explorations.

Bradford has enlarged the scale of her recent work without losing any of the things that made the smaller paintings so strong; odd humor, interior logic, and palimpsest-like surfaces — evidence of her working everything out on the canvas. In her first exhibition at Edward Thorp, she took the minor, masculine genre of marine painting and made it into something strange and richly metaphorical, as in "Wet Horse" (2007), where a horse is seen emerging from the sea, with two open boats in the background and a three-masted frigate nearby. In those paintings she synthesized the concrete and the fantastical, the ordinary and visionary, without slipping into the obvious.

In her current exhibition, Bradford shows mostly large paintings of a strangely lit, monolithic ship and of Superman flying through space, meditations on masculinity. One key to these images is "New Men" (2011), a painting in which she stacked the two title words, with each letter in a different bright color (red, blue, green) on a white field. The use of color to distinguish each letter encourages the viewer to flip the W into an M. Men, the painting optimistically suggests, need to become new, transform themselves.

The ships are sharply foreshortened geometric forms, nearly trapezoids, which slyly allude to Minimalist sculpture. They are ungainly and muscle-bound — headless sitting ducks. Meanwhile, her Superman seems to be caught between flying and diving, both a pretender and a wandering line. In these paintings, Bradford views masculinity as simultaneously powerful and impotent, idiotic and funny. Don't be fooled into thinking that they are not deadly serious, because they are.

At the same time, one could focus solely on the formal virtues of these paintings, the dialogue Bradford establishes between representation and abstraction, as in “White Ship” (2009-2012), where wide juicy swaths of white and black paint against a wider turquoise blue band become the reflection of the flat, irregularly squarish ship directly above, steaming along and seemingly unaware of the layered, atmospheric world it inhabits.

Or one could decide to zoom in on the paintings’ quirky, visionary elements — the three ragged arches rising above the ocean and a white ship (“White Ship of Reason in the Harbor of Chance,” 2011); the red cannonballs falling, like a string of rubies, from a three-masted warship (“Dropping of the Cannon Balls,” 2012); or the large Roman numerals above a becalmed black hull (“S.O.S.,” 2012).

Bradford’s paintings are her own — they don’t look like anyone else’s, though I suspect in time they will influence younger artists. Her images of Superman and ships provide an alternative view of heroism and history that is more textured, knowing and absurd than the hollow, and exceedingly macho, neo-Romanticism of Fischl’s matadors and Cameron’s *Titanic*. There is an intelligence and sensitivity in what she does that can only be gotten by doing, and by remaining open to chance, impulsiveness and to the possibilities of what painting can teach you. At their best, these paintings embody a mystery that keeps opening up without ever revealing itself — they are that rich in their generosity.

Our present state of confusion has quietly morphed into the age of the late bloomer. Something similar happened during the tumultuous decade when Abstract Expressionism was born. The difference, of course, is that painting now flies under the radar, both openly and secretly reviled by those who believe they have purchase on what is truly contemporary. Is the absence of a central paradigm governing painting a good thing or a bad thing? There is certainly no lack of ideologues that will tell you that it is bad thing, and that they know the answer.

I believe, however, that not having a central paradigm is a good thing. According to Morton Feldman: “What was great about the fifties is that for one brief moment — maybe, say, six weeks — nobody understood art. That’s why it all happened.” More than half-a-century later, during which Pop Art, Minimalism, Photorealism, Painterly Realism, Neo-Expressionism and Neo-Geo have come but not completely gone, it seems we are back to square one, but with a twist; nobody can sum up what’s going on.

The possibility that one could be independent; that one doesn’t have to belong to any stylistic tendency or group; and that one need not ally oneself with any of the currently fashionable discourses, is both liberating and daunting, but why it should it be any other way? Given the openness of the territory, one should not be surprised by how many artists find a way to be a conceptual artist that paints, for example.

Kathy Bradford exemplifies what I am getting at. She is in her sixties. She came into her own around five or six years ago, and she has been getting better and better ever since.