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Stopa, Jason. "Katherine Bradford with Jason Stopa." *The Brooklyn Rail*, 3 Apr. 2012, <https://brooklynrail.org/2012/04/art/katherine-bradford-with-jason-stopa>.

KATHERINE BRADFORD with Jason Stopa

On the occasion of her exhibition *Recent Work* at Edward Thorp Gallery in New York (April 19 – May 26, 2012), painter Katherine Bradford welcomed fellow painter and Executive Editor of *NY Arts Magazine*, Jason Stopa, to her Williamsburg studio to talk about her current work and the publication of her first artist book/catalogue which accompanies the show.

Jason Stopa (Rail): Let's start with this new series of works that you've done based around Superman and ships. Can you tell me how this all came about, the idea for the pairing of these two?

Katherine Bradford: Ships have been a longstanding theme of mine. Maybe it came from the fact that I started painting in Maine, on the coast of Maine, where every other painting is of a ship.

Rail: Did you grow up near the ships, seeing them come in and out?

Bradford: No, I think my relationship is more akin to appreciating paintings of ships—Albert Pinkham Ryder.

Rail: He's been a touchstone, for sure.

Bradford: The mysteries of the sea.

Rail: The sea has several associations. I've often thought how it's kind of wonderful how we know more about outer space than we do about the deep sea. Granted some of that is due to our technological limitations, but also because there's stuff down there that maybe we're a little afraid of. We can go into the attic, so to speak, but going into the basement always has a different kind of feeling about it.



Portrait of the artist. Pencil on paper by Phong Bui.

Bradford: I think the sea came into my paintings because the way I put on paint looks like water, and then I added boats and swimmers. It was a watery world.

Rail: In “Victory Ships” you’ve got a Rothko-like motif of two horizontal bars; then the ships seem to be almost floating, in what appear to be clouds or some kind of nether space. Then those ships stop reading as ships and they start reading as some sort of abstract form or tower or erect buildings and become quite mysterious.

Bradford: You just articulated what I’ve been going towards with this newer group of ship paintings, which is to take away the reference to the sea, make it less of a picture and more of a painting. And by that I mean that a picture has a top and a bottom and a horizon line, whereas what you are seeing in this painting is open space. Those ships, as you said, look like they’re in the sky. Which is where Superman is. So I thought that if I eliminated landscape references I would have more options in how I proceed to make paintings.

Rail: I like that distinction between a picture-like space and a painting space. These new ones don’t carry a scenic quality, rather it feels like this is a painted image and these are the forms involved. And I didn’t even pick up that the ships and the Superman paintings have the same palette of red and blue.

Bradford: I’m hoping that will hold the show together, that I used the same palette, more or less.

Rail: Red and blue, yes. That basic pairing has endless play in it.

Bradford: Well, there’s something about that Superman issue that endures, probably more than the red and blue, don’t you think?

Rail: Yes there’s something about the way that you’ve painted the Superman image that makes him a pretty strange little guy.

Bradford: [*Laughs.*]

Rail: [*Laughs.*] I thought I knew who Superman was and what his deal was and now I’m really kind of blown away. Especially in this one called “Superman Responds, Night.”

Bradford: You see this is where I can get into trouble. I’m doing Superman, but am I critiquing Superman? Am I holding him up as a hero? Or am I making a comment about masculinity? I’m certainly not a pop artist; I’m not referencing comics, or the history of pop art. And my Superman, I hope, is genderless.

Rail: Oh, I like that. We’re always viewing him or her in these paintings from the back, so it makes it an androgynous figure. They also don’t seem to be in a great hurry. They are floating through space and descending somewhere, but that somewhere is nondescript. Particularly, in this other piece where that bottom half is a Z shape.

Bradford: Yes, I think finally it was the fact that Superman could fly that I wanted to put in my paintings.

Rail: Do you feel that’s something, on a personal level, about feeling free?

Bradford: Yes, yes, that's it. And that Superman is buoyant, the ships are buoyant, but I show them both in slight trouble. I mean, a lot of my ships are not seaworthy.

Rail: *[Laughs.]* Sure. They're kind of navigating this murky space and they're a little wonky.

Bradford: They are. And the Superman is awkward. This one over here you see has clear underpants on. So I'm dismantling icons, the ship and the Superman. I'm showing them as vulnerable, and yet we're used to seeing them as subjects of strength.

Rail: I remember seeing a ship actually pulling up to a dock for the first time and feeling a sense of awe at how huge it was. In reproduction we're always seeing ships off in the distance. In these slightly older works there's a sense of them being huge and taking up the whole visual field with this dark mass. They're illuminated at night, kind of looming, almost like a head.

Bradford: Yes. But you know, I didn't ever succeed in making a Superman like that, a looming, monumental presence, as some artists might have done. I couldn't find it in myself to present Superman as overpowering. I've made him diminutive.

Rail: *[Laughs.]* Yeah, you have.

Bradford: *[Laughs.]* I wonder why we're laughing. Why is that funny?

Rail: I think because Superman seems pretty humble in these. He or she seems just like a person, they're not the messiah.

Bradford: Yes, but do we want any more heroes that aren't humble?

Rail: That's true. That's a really good point. Especially because heroes historically tend to be figures that we choose to highlight so that their negatives are not even present.

Now how long have these works been in progress? I know you said some were taking longer than others, especially this larger one where there's a lot of edits and a lot of things canceled out.

Bradford: That one is called "Friendly Skies" I've been working on it for two years. I enjoy how your paintings earlier paintings had an incredibly layered quality - with what feels like thin pigments on top of thin pigments. That's not very long in terms of painting though. Maybe I've been working on it 10 years. I had done a painting of a woman flying in 1999 so I must have started thinking about the theme then. After that I did swimmers diving through the air, and then, by making the divers red and blue, they became Superman.

Rail: I remember seeing those—those divers were the first paintings of yours that I had ever seen. By choosing Superman, did you want to move away from any sort of self-referentiality? Superman isn't anybody, any real person at least.

Bradford: Superman opened up a lot of interesting possibilities for me: he's supernatural, maybe even mystical. Whereas with the swimmers, I felt I was getting a little close to leisure time, to Fairfield Porter and Alex Katz in Maine, and I didn't want to go there.

Rail: Yeah, hanging out by the pool *[laughs]*.

Bradford: Here's a photo from maybe 15 years ago where I'm in my studio wearing a red cape. Would you recognize that as me?

Rail: [*Laughs.*] I don't know—not at first glance.

Bradford: Now why are you laughing? Cause it's so stupid?

Rail: Well, this picture is just so—like it's one of those pictures where you have a friend over, you're kind of goofing off in your studio, and just being who you are. It's totally unpretentious. It's just wonderful. Especially this—is that a lightsaber? What is that?

Bradford: Yes, it is. It's from Darth Vader, isn't it?

Rail: Yeah, Luke Skywalker.

Bradford: Oh, Luke Skywalker. Well then in the catalogue that I put together I paired it with a picture I took of a guy about to take the subway and he has a gold Superman cape on and you see he thinks that's perfectly fine to wear. So I wanted to make the point that it's a very human urge to try and signify your power through capes.

Rail: I remember tying a blanket around myself as a boy, and that feeling that somehow I'd become invincible because it transformed me somehow. Maybe there's a transformative element to what Superman is or represents that really makes these paintings pretty amazing, because we've introduced this figure that's beyond belief. Like you said, supernatural.

Bradford: I love what you said about tying a cape on as a boy. Here is a picture of me with my grandson; we both have capes on.

Rail: Oh, that's a wonderful picture. It relates to your painting. I feel your works have certain things I'm not quite privy to, in terms of information, but I feel you're giving me enough information to piece my own story together.

Bradford: That's where the mystery comes in.

Rail: Yeah, that there's something elusive about it.

Bradford: I'm sure some people don't like my paintings for this reason.

Rail: [*Laughs.*] I think that's the nature of good painting—something is withheld. That's maybe the nature of humanity, a little bit, too. These feel very human to me. People don't fully disclose everything all at once, they give you little bits. And even still, there might be other layers that are somehow buried and one just has to figure them out over time.

Bradford: This may be a good time to be doing paintings that appear human or have a humanity that maybe a decade ago wasn't considered very interesting. Interesting—no. It wasn't considered modern enough, wasn't considered groundbreaking enough.

Rail: I agree. Even with this painting you were talking about, where you found this bare canvas that already had some paint marks and a texture on it and just kind of responded to what you had with your own ideas. And that feels like such a human reaction to certain stimuli, as opposed to cleaning everything up. I feel like that painting stands out in this grouping a lot because it is so distinct in terms of the handling. Superman is so elongated and kind of clunky.

He's humorous. Have you come up with a title for that one? because it is so distinct in terms of the handling. Superman is so elongated and kind of clunky. He's humorous. Have you come up with a title for that one?

Bradford: It's the one called "Clear Underpants." Maybe in another time the goal would have been to try to paint the figure correctly or to show some kind of skill in depicting it, but I've let that go.

Rail: I enjoy how your paintings earlier paintings had an incredibly layered quality - with what feels like thin pigments on top of thin pigments. Yet with these there's a very direct handling. I think you were saying that this came about gradually, but was that an easy transition?

Bradford: I'm still trying to transition. I saw this show as giving me the opportunity to try out a lot of different approaches. Some of the paintings have a lot of layers of paint on them, as you pointed out. And then I challenged myself to work in acrylic on raw canvas and have a limited shot at getting the paint on the canvas. Maybe we have more permission now to do the kind of show that includes a lot of different directions. When I first moved to New York, the definition of a coherent show was work that looked very much alike.

Rail: Maybe that's what's really refreshing about these works, they don't always make sense one to the next. They're all independent of one another. The color might be the unifying element that keeps us moving through all the pieces, that red and blue.

Bradford: I had a wonderful studio visit with Phong Bui several years ago. I was looking at a painting with him and I said, "Well, if I proceed in this direction, Phong, the painting's not going to make sense." And he looked at me and he said, "Oh, Kathy, you don't want your paintings to make sense." And I never forgot that. I thought it was such a liberating point of view.

Rail: That is a very liberating point of view. I was listening to the Talking Heads the other day, with *Stop Making Sense*. Once you stop making sense, things start to happen.

Bradford: When you think of the Dadaists or Fluxus, they took an absurdist view of the world because they felt that the world wasn't making sense, especially outside events. Weren't they reacting to the World Wars and thought things were such a mess that art would proceed in a direction of complete whimsy?

Rail: And that absurdist point of view I still feel like has a lot of gravity to it. Your images feel so playful and yet at the same time kind of serious. They're inviting and also kind of ominous or unsettling. I kind of keep going back and forth. It's an interesting effect.

Bradford: Are you maybe referring to that one of Superman at home?

Rail: The one with what looks like explosions on it. He's so casual, it just seems like he's hanging out on the porch, or something. Hanging out in the grass with his legs crossed.

Bradford: I think some people are bothered by that painting because they don't know where I've put Superman and I'm calling the painting "At Home." He's surrounded by fantastical shapes only a painter could make up. And why is he posing like that? I haven't answered the questions at all, but let's say that if Superman's an important man, where does he belong in the scheme of things?

Rail: What do you feel like the reception of this recent work will be? I remember reading on a couple people's blogs how they felt that the "Clear Underpants" painting at Janet Kurnatowski Gallery was such a distinct move, that it was kind of wild to see that kind of freedom.

Bradford: You know, I wouldn't say wild is a word that's been associated with me much. One thing about receiving a Guggenheim grant this year is that it enabled me to do something that I've wanted to do for a long time, which is to make an artist's book catalogue, and have it just be a playful collection of images. The artwork in the show is in the book but also pictures, news clippings, and photographs of my life, so that the works of art are placed in a context, in a visual context of my own invention.

Rail: I like that you didn't preface it with an essay. What is this? A diary entry?

Bradford: Yes, I tore a page out of my journal that describes what I did on December 17, 2011. People looking through this book will get an idea of my life as an artist, or maybe they won't.

Rail: This kind of very personal inclusion is wonderful. Perhaps painting has changed in the past decade in that it's totally okay to be personal right now about one's work and about the way one approaches making an image.

Bradford: Maybe it's totally okay to be private, personal, and poetic, whereas there was a time, especially right after 9/11, where it was important to be relevant, political, and solve the world's problems.

Rail: Yeah, which is a big burden to try to carry on one's shoulders all the time. I believe that art, particularly painting, can be political insofar as the personal is political, but trying to change the current political sphere...I don't know if that's what it's ultimate aim should be. Personally speaking, I believe that when things get too political, they wind up only being read as such. Are you really influenced by poetry in your work?

Bradford: I am. I feel it's very close to painting. I want to make paintings the way Frank O'Hara wrote his poems, his *Lunch Poems*, where he'd just walk outside and matter of factly make a poem out of what happened to him. Maybe that's the quality I'm trying to put in this artist's book catalogue.

Rail: ell, this definitely conveys that matter of factness because you've allowed such everyday kinds of experiences - a stream of consciousness, putting in that diary entry, and these photos of ships capsizing.

Bradford: Which happened just a few months ago. That Italian cruise ship listed over on its side and my friends sent me images of it and it was a good feeling because they associated that with my work, maybe with me.

Rail: Yeah, when I saw that image I immediately thought of you, too. [*Laughs.*] There's a self-referential quality that we've read into some of the images you create, where it's almost like you're painting a state of mind, a way of being.

Bradford: You know for a long time I worked on the Titanic story and I'm not quite sure why, but the black ship going into the white iceberg was something I did over and over again. I even made a video of it and I made little objects. They were Titanic ocean liners, I brought them out onto the sidewalk, and took pictures of them crashing into heaps of snow.

Rail: I'd love to see that because it sounds very much like your paintings—a playful element and yet an element of something very serious going on.

Bradford: It was man and nature. It was the huge ocean liner being completely humbled by the ice in the sea. That story's very close to 9/11, our World Trade Center towers which collapsed before our very eyes, something we never thought would happen.

Rail: Yeah, such a huge monument that signified all of these very American kinds of ideas—it represents economy, it's this monolith of technological achievement.

Bradford: And I think recently with the big banks going under and some of the economic collapse, I thought of the images of the ocean liners tipping over.

Rail: Oh wow, I like that relationship, because they do represent themselves as...

Bradford: Bastions of safety, in a sea.

Rail: Right. Yeah. Well, and I heard this quote going around for a while, "too big to fail." And I felt that was an interesting moniker to attach, because really, what is too big fail?

Bradford: I don't think we're going to believe that anymore, are we? Now we have entire economies of countries failing.

Rail: Yeah, it's a very interesting time. People feel like everything's kind of back to square one and we can figure things out again, which is kind of exciting from an artistic and even personal point of view.