

ARTFORUM

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Katherine Bradford BOWDOIN COLLEGE MUSEUM OF ART

New York- and Maine-based painter Katherine Bradford has been active since the 1970s, yet her ambiguously narrative, color-saturated paintings have recently assumed newfound relevance in the context of work by younger artists such as Katherine Bernhardt, Dan McCarthy, and Michael Williams. Considering both career arc and choice of painterly themes, however, Bradford's closest peer may be Joyce Pensato, who also began eliciting attention relatively late and whose works resonate with Bradford's cheekily dramatic cartoon-character portraits, which shuffle interestingly close to bathos.

Bradford's best-known paintings picture a costumed Superman cruising the sky, but "August," her exhibition at Bowdoin College Museum of Art, curated by Joachim Homann, spotlighted another favored theme: maritime scenes, something critic John Yau called a "minor, masculine genre" in a review of Bradford's 2012 show at Edward Thorp Gallery in New York. While her work can easily be interpreted as ironizing patriarchy—the Man of Steel, the steady ship, even the (minor, masculine) act of seaside painting—the disquieting scenes in Bradford's recent canvases don't initially read as takedowns of modernism's gendered exclusivity or inflated heroics. In these eight paintings from the past three years—renderings of divers, Franz Kline-like shapes-as-ships, and scenes of nocturnal loneliness—the artist appears earnestly invested in the use of abstract color fields as a means of injecting mood into her landscapes.

The imaginative wit that spawns laugh-out-loud paintings like *At Home*, 2012, in which Superman sits primly with crossed legs in a bucolic backyard, is still there in Bradford's marine paintings, only deployed to more existential effect. A sun-scorched body in *Sunbathers*, 2012,



Katherine Bradford, *Titanic Orange Sea*, 2012, acrylic on canvas, 10 x 10".

jauntily props itself up on an elbow to gaze down the beach at a brownish, barely there shadow-figure lounging nearby with demonic coolness, its guts a horrible mess of Twombly cream and crimson. In *Diver, Blue/Red*, 2012, a riff on several earlier paintings of bodies suspended in air (including her 2011 *Super Flight*), a woman wearing a suspiciously Superman-like blue-and-red one-piece leaps high off a ledge into rose-white Guston gloaming that Bradford bangs out with thick, intersecting strokes. *Titanic Orange Sea*, 2012, seems like another reflection on late Guston, filtered through Gottlieb's toxic palette. Three gloopy Creamsicle-colored balls linger on a stripe of white that dumbly excretes a drip of sky blue, all backdropped by an ink-black night with the sea a fiery mess of orange and white, a pale glacier the only witness. Whether through the frosting-white Twombly haze of *Open Ocean*, 2012, or the Rothkoesque effect of pink, purple, and orange shimmering from within a colossal vessel's black hull in *Ship in Blue Harbor*, 2011–12, Bradford earmarks vast swaths of space, freestyling with pure abstraction alongside figurative imagery.

Still, her seascapes have none of the outward drama of AbEx, or the romanticism of Albert Pinkham Ryder or Winslow Homer, for that matter; the theater is an interior one. Bradford has made many paintings of ships and swimmers before, but the grouping in "August" seems designed to capture something like the essence of late summer in a cold-weather, rural state . . . and all its attendant glory and dread. This suggests a fearlessness on Bradford's part to go where "serious" painters of the current moment don't—dallying with the contested marks of high modernism and doing so with a regional sensibility that risks being seen as provincial. Such a gambit relates this work to feminism's scraps with midcentury formalism and to its engagement of traditionally marginalized genres: Lynda Benglis's Play-Doh-colored "fallen paintings" and Judy Chicago's diaristic, suggestively vaginal "Childhood Rejection Drawings" of flowers are just a few examples of women artists sticking it to Greenbergian precepts shortly after they had hardened into dogma. Given Bradford's reputation for wry humor, some dose of the laughable would seem to be automatically encoded into her brawny brushstrokes. But her ocean scenes never feel like parodies—more like confident, quietly affecting images that bravely strike art history's major and minor keys.