

## HYPERALLERGIC

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### Making Sense of Paintings That Tell Snippets of Stories



Katherine Bradford, "Studio Bath" (2011–14) (all photos by the author for Hyperallergic)

The narrative impulse in painting is nothing new. From centuries of art history to the resurgence of figurative painting in the wake of post-war abstraction, some of human culture's most beloved storytellers have been painters. Viewers, too, are adept at reading narratives into images — stories are, after all, how we make sense of the world — and the middle-ground between the information that figurative painters put into their compositions and what viewers add to them in the act of looking is the subject of *Long Story Short*, an exhibition at Brooklyn's Trestle Gallery curated by Karin Bravin of BravinLee Programs.

The seven paintings on view (at least most of them) provide fragments and clues from stories. Like stray frames from a lost film, they tease and prompt viewers to imagine what happened before and after. The purest examples of artists tickling the narrative nerve are pieces by Katherine Bradford and Todd Bienvenu. In "Studio Bath" (2011–14), Bradford portrays a large studio with canvases against the walls, a vast pink floor, and two figures sharing a claw-foot bathtub filled with turquoise-green water at the center. It's tempting to imagine that one of the figures in the tub is the artist, perhaps Bradford herself. The piece is full of odd and vivid details

that might be clues to the scene's meaning — the thread of spilled bathwater pooling on the floor, the neon orange outline of a staircase to nowhere at the back of the studio, a giant exit sign that might just be a large-scale painting of the word "EXIT" — but fitting them into any kind of coherent story remains up to the viewer (and very challenging).

What's going on in Bienvenu's "Pure Class" (2014) seems a little clearer, at least initially. A couple sits at a table covered in glasses and bottles, the woman looking on as the man projectile vomits a huge blob of bright green bile. But the more details emerge from the painting, whose thick, drippy brushstrokes and dark tones effectively evoke the feeling of being in a dive bar several hours into a bender, the harder reading it becomes. What to make of the two other figures seated at the table, are they drinking buddies or interlopers? Why is the TV hanging over the drinkers showing footage of horses fucking? Is the viewer, given the way Bienvenu frames the scene, the fifth drinker at the table? The painting plays *Hangover*-like tricks on the mind, presenting one moment from a big night out and leaving viewers to piece the rest of it together.

More impenetrable mysteries are available in pieces like Hilary Doyle's "Subway Tracks" (2014), which presents a life-size view from the platform of a New York City subway station, complete with trash-littered tracks and dirt-smeared tiles. There's less drama in Doyle's piece than in Bradford and Bienvenu's paintings, but its forensic level of detail tells more mundane stories — about the traveler who attempted to spit out his gum onto the tracks but didn't make it past the yellow platform border, about the MTA employees who half-erased graffiti from the station's tiled wall, about the worker who discarded her supermarket bag after scarfing down lunch in transit. Kenny Rivero's similarly enigmatic but completely mystical contribution, "Homage to the Three Three (PE NYK)" (2015), has a ghostly head floating (or painted) on a brick wall. Around the corner flames shoot from a window, while a cluster of numbers apparently tagged on the wall tempt the viewer's inner cryptographer. Like so many of the other works on view, Rivero's piece is full of lovely painterly effects, from the thickening series of lines that make up the figure's fan-like hair to the precise, Op art-ish grid of brick outlines. The painting is full of opaque symbolism.

Some of Bravin's selections, however, are less on-theme. In her painting and collage piece "Who Has the Talking Stick" (2013), Halley Zien offers a glimpse of a raucous family gathering at which everyone seems to be talking simultaneously. The setting and figures are depicted with a mix of oil paints and collage elements cut from fashion magazines, giving the entire scene a slightly monstrous feel and adding to the sense of chaos. Though the work is vibrant and among the most engaging on view, its scene of domestic discord feels much easier to pin down and make sense of than the pieces by Bradford, Doyle, and Bienvenu. *Long Story Short*'s most perplexing inclusions, though, are two paintings by Nicholas Borelli that fall somewhere between landscape and still life. Depending on their scale, they might depict giant pink trees and a black mountain, or a large rock and some land-loving sea anemones. They are puzzling, but neither offers snippets of a narrative. Long story short, all figurative paintings may contain suggestions of storytelling, but only some spark the viewer's imagination.