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Katherine Bradford: We float and dream

"Katherine Bradford: Divers and Dreamers" at Adams and Ollman loves its medium.

Until June 3rd, you have the chance to immerse yourself in a small, luminous set of Katherine Bradford's acrylic paintings, *Divers and Dreamers* at Adams and Ollman. While Bradford is a regular at A & O, this show is the first one dedicated to her recent paintings of rough-hewn figures awash in a firmament of some kind. The bathing figure is a well-established theme of figurative painting, but Bradford's sort of humble mysticism goes somewhere entirely different than any formal study of a body in water. From a recent review in *Art in America*: "Hers are salt-of-the-earth American swimmers and surfers, not fancy-pants 'bathers.'" There is humor and a sort of ringing, distant strangeness in the atmosphere and material of these paintings.

Before you picture these paintings, you need to know about the surface. The paint is thick and layered to a degree rarely seen with acrylic. Acrylic has long been characterized by its fast drying time, its water solubility, its capacity for bright synthetic colors, and the literal plasticity of its dozens of mixing media. These qualities, compared to the alchemy of oil paint and its media, are inescapably modern: acrylic is bright, fast, synthetic, and convenient. Bradford works with acrylic in a way that takes advantage of these qualities of the medium in a way almost no one else does. Big names like Warhol, Riley, Kelly, and Lichtenstein got acrylic into museums as an almost ideally-flat medium, a spiritual middle ground between painting and photography. The surface of Bradford's paintings reads more like a Monet.

Bradford's colors are broken and reassembled over many layers, and they build depth and vibrance through complex relationships of transparency, texture, and accident. Her figures are immersed in this sea of material, and built up from it, with an overall effect of a magical, electrified land populated by lumpy people either enjoying a day at the beach or a spiritual ascension.



Katherine Bradford, *Three Swimmer Pool*, 2016, acrylic on canvas, 21 x 24 inches/Adams and Ollman

In her charming interview with her son, Bradford explained the origin of a painting of a horse standing in water as an accident of trying to cover up “a failed pair of horse legs.” The layers of these paintings do easily read as a history of creation, the figures sliding between layers of the landscape that produces them. “The open ocean at night is visually intoxicating to me. It contains everything a painter might need: endless mystery and lack of boundaries, hidden stories and dramatic light.”

Bradford is essentially using the speed of acrylic to prematurely age the pieces; painting onto rather than into that many layers would represent months of carefully timed drying were it done with oils. That’s not to say that the paintings are overworked or muddy in any way. A good portion of their joy comes from the light touches and deft, single strokes that are as vital to the effects of the work as the many thick layers. The surface of the water in *Waders Under Stars* is finished from two or three strokes of opaque, matte blue from a brush that’s clearly clumping from age and use. The sky in the same picture is stitched from similar strokes of black, but with more energy and fill. Marks are decisions, and these are the kind that are only made when immersed in a material and a moment. They are free and loose, but precise and necessary. The effect is one of ongoing creation, that the people and their world and these captured moments might vibrate back into dust at any moment. (Appropriate for anyone chewing over the newly popular existential dread of that Portland megaquake.)

Three of the nine paintings are big enough to get lost in if you nose up to them, while the smaller ones feel like windows into this watery dream. Many of the figures are cropped or crowded by the edges of the paintings, which works with the chunky, cozy feeling of their material world. Many of them have a Peter Doig-ish smattering of globules of light—lanterns or fireflies or swampgas or just drips. One of the largest pieces features an appearance from Bradford’s “frumpy Superman,” as her son calls him, and a couple of small figures may not even be in the water at all.

Katherine Bradford has been painting for most of her life, but according to her son her career only took off around the age most people consider retiring. There is a comfortable dedication that comes through these pieces and her other recent work. They are patient and floppy, but supported by a deep knowledge of the media and a steady skill that seems built up like the surface of these paintings, not sharpened impatiently.

In *What Painting Is*, James Elkins points out that painting is one of the most inefficient methods of making an image, which suggests that time is a fundamental component of the medium. I’m sure it was far from easy, but the time Bradford has put into her acrylics makes for a hell of a gift for the viewer.