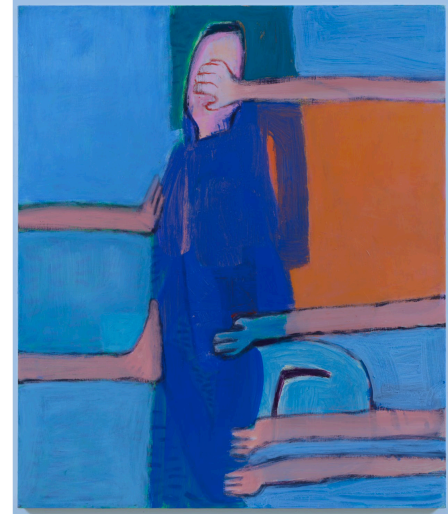


The New Criterion

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Heroes forever and ever

Whatever might be said of Katherine Bradford's career review at the Portland Museum of Art, the show constitutes a personal victory. Determined to paint, the artist withdrew from a marriage, brought her children from Maine to New York, and purchased a studio building in Brooklyn long before the borough's discovery by the art world. Subsequently she met the woman with whom she's still partnered, convened with like-minded artists, studied, taught, and painted every day. Now eighty years old, she continues working with undiminished productivity. Thirty years of canvases—likable, honest, and lively to a one—justify themselves on the museum walls of the pma's "Flying Woman: The Paintings of Katherine Bradford."¹



Katherine Bradford, *Push Pull*, (2019).
PHOTO: IMAGE COURTESY THE NEW CRITERION

They also seem deficient of innovation. I refrain from holding that against the artist, because we live in an era in which any painting is going to recapitulate prior examples. But Bradford's exhibition appeared contemporaneously with "Philip Guston Now" at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, where Guston's oeuvre was witnessed to survive multiple attempts of curatorial assassination. In 1962, Hilton Kramer was already complaining (regarding Dubuffet) about "the line of mandarin intellectuals who yearn to play the primitive," which explains his critique of Guston in similar terms eight years later. Having seen the shows within three months of each other, I stand by the vitality of later Guston and the value of Bradford's descendant works, but I notice a drop of aesthetic stakes from one to the other and I better appreciate Kramer's fatigue.

Bradford has long acknowledged Guston's influence and her admiration for his art. Weirdly, the catalogue for her exhibition at the pma does not. "Her work reveals a dialogue with Lois Dodd and Marsden Hartley, as well as Mark Rothko and Pierre Bonnard," writes the pma director Mark H. C. Bessire in the foreword. Each connection is plausible. But the arms pressing on the figure from the sides of the canvas in Bradford's *Push Pull* (2019) could only have derived from one artist. Similarly arranged limbs collide in Guston's *Aegean* (1978), loaned to "Philip Guston Now" from a private collection. I leave it to those who insist that Guston was never the target of cancel culture to explain the erasure.

Guston deserves significant credit, or blame, for the wave of neo-expressionism that swelled in the decade after his death in 1980. This period corresponds with Bradford's arrival in New York. It turned out that Guston's figurative line, at once painterly and cartoonish, was hard to emulate and harder still to transform into an original vision. Susan Rothenberg accomplished it. So did

Bradford. Why did these women succeed, while so many male artists of the time spiraled into self-parody? I suggest that the men used expressionism to indulge in bravado, whereas the animating force of Gustonesque figuration is fear. Fear in Rothenberg is self-evident. In Bradford it takes the form of anxiety, hesitancy, and awkwardness. The figure in *Woman Flying* (1991), the chronological beginning of the show, is faceless and naked but for a red cape à la Superman. Unlike the Man of Steel, she is hovering with her arms out to each side as if balancing on a tightrope. In *Boxers under Lights* (2018), the fighters clinch with the self-conscious listlessness of a junior-high-school slow dance. Bradford turns her sense of vulnerability into pictorial astuteness.

In contrast to Rothenberg, Bradford wanted to achieve the sonorous chroma that she admires in Rothko. This too was a fruitful expansion of neo-expressionism, as Rothenberg was drawn to explore a palette of blood, charcoal, and snow, and the rest of the crowd rolled aimlessly around the color wheel. Bradford's paintings begin as color slabs, which find their way to figures via a process of association. The other reason I forgive their lack of innovation is that the artist's motivations are heartily visual. Asked by an interviewer in the catalogue what draws her to Rothko's fields of color, Bradford answers, "They look good." For all the hogwash spouted in the name of modernist abstraction, both for and against, those three words encapsulate everything that matters about it.

Crucially, Bradford can manifest that sensibility in her painting. "I only work with colors that I really like," she says in the same interview. I admit to a cavil: one of those colors is Quinacridone Magenta, the culmination of several centuries of effort to manufacture a lightfast cool, dark red. It tints to a readily identifiable pink that grows a little overbearing in Bradford's recent acrylics, and its enormous tinctorial strength pulls any variety of blue into the same orbit of purple. Consequently I found myself preferring the palette of some of the earlier oils, especially *Sargasso* (2012), an abstracted ship surrounded with luscious scumbles of orange atmosphere and emerald sea, delineated with dots that seem to have escaped from a Howard Hodgkin panel. But, taken singly, even the most Quinacridone-flooded works are effective. Particularly admirable is *Leap Frog I* (2018), the arms of the vaulting figure preserving the washes of previous layers, as an encroaching field of variegated violet sensitively forms their shape. Rothko, obliged to paint with the since-obsolete Lithol Red, would have envied its glow.

To quote Bradford from the interview once more, "I've been struggling to want to do away with fixed identities for a long time. Being female, being queer, being an artist, mother, grandmother, aren't subjects I want to talk about. . . . I'd really like to talk about people in my work without having it be a political statement. I suppose this is impossible, but frankly I see my own identity evolving and changing—sometimes slowly and sometimes at breakneck speed." This correlates to her interest in superheroes, a line of whom appear in one 2020 painting, delightfully sharing a single vermilion cape. The heroes of comics, whose identities are costumes, permit Bradford that fluidity of being. Like Guston, Bradford possesses a most valuable thing: the promise of her work transcending her individual person and persisting long past her time.