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Painter Katherine Bradford and weaver Diedrick Brackens pair up in exhibition at Harvard's Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts

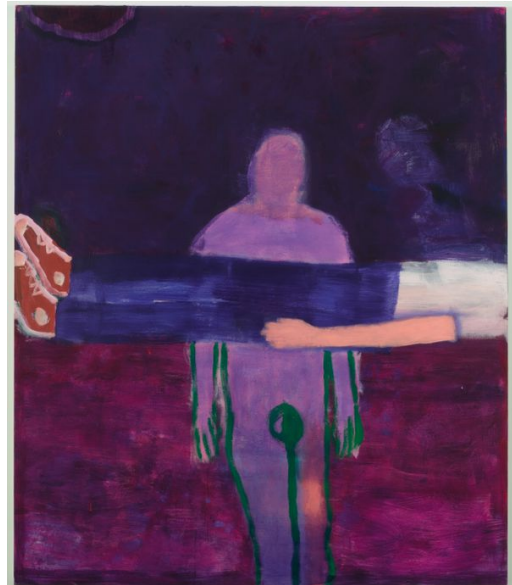
CAMBRIDGE — A headless figure in jeans and a white T-shirt hovers midframe in Katherine Bradford's "Brothers," the softly inchoate painting that meets you at the front door of her shared exhibition with Diedrick Brackens at Harvard's Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts.

Is it a tone setter or a scene stealer? I love it and can't decide. It's a riddle of soft violet fuzz: a featureless creature — brother #2? — presides, his horizontal sibling detailed down to his red Chuck Taylors, however conspicuously absent he may be from the neck up. The scene could be menacing, but it's anything but; instead, it's more like a vivid dream, where even the bizarre is met with a warm and forgiving shrug.

Warmth, in fact, is the connective tissue between Bradford and Brackens, and it binds the exhibition together. This is a show about interiors, whether of physical space or the heart and mind. I hesitate to call it intimate, a worn-out term that doesn't quite hit the mark here. There's something more mysterious at play. Every piece is fully felt, uncynical and unpolished. But that doesn't mean there aren't complications.

"Mother Knows," a 2020 Bradford painting in which a totemic matriarch dispassionately surveys a child with his or her back to the viewer, pants bunched at the knees, is one of those. Both artists walk a line between connection and disconnection, intimacy and estrangement. It's a push-pull that anyone who's had — or been — a mother (or father, I can vouch) knows all too well.

Brackens, a weaver whose raw fluency with his medium yields works that feel both tender and visceral, summons up histories — whether of art, Black America, or his own — that cut close to the bone. "Maximum Depth," a powerful tapestry woven hazy blue-black up top and red below, is openly autobiographical. In it, a swimmer lumbers awkwardly in the red depths; it's Lake Mexia in Texas, where Brackens grew up. Gliding above him is a catfish, a Brackens touchstone. In a medium historically laden with all manner of mythic beast, the humble catfish, a staple of the southern diet, often anchors his work. The piece is darkly bright, black thread



Katherine Bradford, "Brothers," 2017. KATHERINE BRADFORD/JOE DENARDO

woven through primary color, mirroring its mood. Brackens tells of the lake as a site both sparkling with joy and burdened by terror: When he was a child, three Black men drowned in its waters while in police custody.

The show is a strict two-hander, no Bradford work unpaired with one by Brackens and vice-versa. (There's more Bradford to come: As the [2021 winner](#) of the Rappaport Prize, she'll have a solo exhibition at the deCordova Sculpture Park and Museum some time next year.) "Maximum Depth" shares space with two Bradford pictures. Its natural companion, "Mother's Lap" — that again — is far from tender. It's a stiff and chilly clutter of obscured faces, a figure lain prone and rigid at its core. Its glaring palette of harsh orange, yellow and sickly gray-pink is seductive and bleak; it attracts and repels. "Maximum Depth" has stories to tell; "Mother's Lap" does too, but it's keeping them to itself.

Taken together, the broad read is one of big themes around family, community, togetherness and solitude. It shouldn't surprise that the exhibition is a direct product of the pandemic; just before the lockdowns, Carpenter Center director Daniel Byers was planning a larger show about contemporary figuration. As the pandemic dragged on, he chose to narrow down and pair Bradford and Brackens exclusively. Both artists made much of the work you'll see here while in that first year of isolation, loading it with anxious solitude.

Brackens's "Nuclear Lovers," 2020, two male silhouettes with bolts of yellow yarn at the fingertips, was the first piece he made under lockdown. It's a fraught balance of tender and nervy — sparks, after all, fly. Across the room, the clinch in Bradford's "Boxers Under Lights," 2018 — capturing what fighters do when they're worn out or in trouble — feels mutual, more consoling than competitive. Maybe it's 2020-21 talking, but the piece feels heavy with the question as much on our minds now as then: What next?