

TWO COATS OF PAINT

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Katherine Bradford: Heaven on Earth



Canada Gallery: Katherine Bradford, Arms and the Sea, 2023, Installation View

To one growing up Catholic, heaven and hell were in no way, shape, or form mere metaphors for possible destinations in the afterlife. They were very real places to spend all eternity, either heavenly salvation or eternal damnation. Forty years ago, Katherine Bradford proposed an exhibition to Chris Martin and me titled "3 Catholics." While it never took place, the idea was to gather three lapsed Catholics who shared that particular cultural grounding and also similar painting values, and who were all now earnestly in pursuit of our new religion – Painting. This memory came wafting back to me the morning after viewing "Arms and the Sea," Bradford's solo show of remarkable new paintings at Canada.

Bradford has found salvation, heaven on earth in the here and now, with her dreamy, atmospheric depictions of celestial skies and dark, mysterious waters. Several of the paintings feature groupings of people, signifying an interest in camaraderie and community, while others

present just a couple of figures in an intimate moment. In the diptych *In the Lake*, Bradford's evocations of frolickers in translucent phtalo blue waters convey a sense of ease and grace. Bathers of different races peacefully comingle in these waters. *Swimmers Under Pink Sky* is another painting that shows wading figures of varying skin tones and signals Bradford's desire to represent people of all skin colors. The brown woman stands slightly apart but her burnt-sienna skin is a complementary magnet for the peachy pink sky and cerulean waters, which form the color of the central figure's bathing suit. If purgatory is endless waiting, heaven, it would seem, must be blissful wading.

Another wading painting, and the one the exhibition is named for, is the wonderful *Arms and the Sea*. Here, the heavens – not just the stars but the planets, too – engulf two bathers. The central figure has white hair and is presumably older and stretches their arms out as if to balance. A younger figure off to the side seems to sense this and extends an arm to help. There is a looseness to how it's painted – relaxed, wispy strokes on raw canvas – that imparts a sense of ease that mirrors the subject matter. The color sings a sweet harmony with the range of blues from cerulean to purple that calls to the pink bather, with her orange suit and ginger hair. Every star and planet, and every figural gesture, is aligned to create this transcendent, timeless moment. Another celestial beauty is the small and sweet-hearted *In Bed Together*, which pictures a couple safely tucked under the covers talking while their bed is afloat in outer space as the planets stand watch – a testament to the power and majesty of love.

We come back down to earth with *Carry Painting, Wounded*, which seems to have mortality as its theme and bears at least a cursory resemblance to Deposition of Christ paintings in its depiction of a limp figure being held and supported. Except in this painting, a hand emerges from underground, in line with a horror movie trope, threatening to pull the carried figure below. A more comical approach to this theme, *Mother Carry*, features a brusquely painted, brightly colored batch of characters with animated facial expressions who bear the mother figure aloft in her big pink dress. The figures visually pop against the dark blue ground, but the gorgeous color play of the body parts slow the eye down. Mortality is also at play in *Under My House*, a title that personalizes the subject for the 81-year-old Bradford. We see a figure either buried or swimming – this ambiguity is a hallmark of Bradford's work – underneath what looks to be her Maine home.

I often think Bradford's figures are partially an excuse to play with color. Indeed, the figures in *Women Under the Stars* become containers of colored light of immense luminosity, much like the stars in the purple sky behind them, and remind me that we are all made of stardust, and are all carriers of energy and light. And if the closely huddled women in the painting are any guide, perhaps the tighter we cling to one another, the brighter we shine. Unlike David Byrne's heaven, where nothing ever happens, Katherine Bradford's vision of heaven on earth is a place where folks reach out to other folks, especially to someone in need, where we embrace one another, and where we swim together under the stars with a sense of wonder and awe as we contemplate our incredible luck to be here right now, in spite of everything, in this transcendent moment.