

BROOKLYN RAIL

Drill, Jason. "Katherine Bradford: Arms and the Sea." *The Brooklyn Rail*, 8 Dec. 2023, brooklynrail.org/2023/12/artseen/Katherine-Bradford-Arms-and-the-Sea.

Katherine Bradford: *Arms and the Sea*



Installation view: *Katherine Bradford: Arms and the Sea*, Canada, New York, 2023. Courtesy Canada.

New York and Maine-based painter Katherine Bradford has built a reputation for highly saturated paintings of figures set in dreamy, disquieting surroundings that diffuse into abstract fields of color. Her fifth solo exhibition with Canada features this hallmark as strongly as ever. Fifteen acrylic paintings broaden Bradford's engagement with themes of care, friendship, and vulnerability. A cast of characters, including mothers and swimmers built in thin layers of semi-transparent paint, are set in primordial atmospheres, where planets and stars shine over ominous bodies of water. Most are anonymous silhouettes defined by colorful body parts and bold contouring. Some have stark but expressive faces, formed by simple eyes and mouths. Many stand tall, others lie horizontally; some hover weightlessly in space, others bleed into

their canvas support. All quickly dissolve into the luxurious fusions of color that have earned Bradford wide recognition.

Considered together, the paintings do not form a single narrative. Rather, they propose diverging points of view within individual pictures. Even the exhibition title oozes with double meanings: to Bradford, “arms” evoke bodily limbs as well as the gruesome apparatus of war, and “sea” captures the mystery of an ocean while invoking Bradford’s need to see life around her. In *Women and House* (2023), for example, a peach-colored house set against fields of purple extends into the torsos of two figures, whose heavy outlines assert their presence despite their hollow interiors. The composition instances a clear dialogue with Louise Bourgeois’s “Femme Maison” series of women whose heads are replaced with houses—a potent confrontation of conventional ideas about femininity and domesticity. Distinct from Bourgeois, however, Bradford depicts two women attached to one house. This could echo a dilemma posed by the home in Bradford’s own life, as she has described this painting in relation not only to the dreaded sacrifice of identity that many women face in the home, but also to the love and connection that she and her spouse feel toward theirs.

A similar house appears in *Under My House* (2022), which Bradford identifies as the old farmhouse in Maine where she raised her children. A lone body lies horizontally in a deep expanse of blue and purple at the lower portion of the canvas, its head and feet extending beyond the edges of the house. The composition recalls a memorable device in film history, as if Bradford has lifted Dorothy’s house from the Wicked Witch of the East’s famously concealed body, whose Technicolor dreaminess is reimagined in Bradford’s rudimentary universe. In moments like these, Bradford’s harmonious mixings of color form a strong throughline throughout the show. With all their complexities, the paintings’ greatest certainties lie in Bradford’s scumbled layers of paint that build her brilliant palette from the ground up.

The theme of lifting or carrying features strongly. *Mother Carry* (2022), for example, shows three figures carrying a fourth over their heads. Whether to danger or safety remains unclear. The central figure smiles whimsically, but the lifted figure appears to gasp in fear. The discordant expressions on their homespun faces suggest the thrill of an unsolved mystery, playfully swaying between a heroic and villainous storyline. Other figures stretch their arms horizontally in the show’s titular work, *Arms and the Sea*, and its largest painting, the jewel toned *In the Lake* (both 2023). On the heels of Bradford’s recent museum survey, their postures recall important early paintings like *Woman Flying* (1999). The figures in the new works are seen in groups, but because there are considerable gaps between them, they seem to explore states of isolation, conveying the specific kind of loneliness one can only feel when surrounded by a crowd.

In *Women Under the Stars* (2022), six multicolor silhouettes cluster around a central pink figure who takes the shape of a chair underneath glowing orbs, which infer a dark celestial setting. A bright red arm brazenly pushes itself forward, almost to the point of fragmentation. Bent at the elbow, the arm conforms neatly to the shape of the seated pink figure, revisiting Bradford’s “Lap Sitters” motif, begun in 2020. The figures’ closeness creates a scene of interpersonal care that relates to Bradford’s recent exploration of the archetype of the mother—another major theme that Bourgeois explored for several decades. Now in her eighties, Bradford remains similarly productive. Like Bourgeois, who began one of her most significant bodies of work—her monumental steel spiders, dedicated to her mother—in her eighties, Bradford continues to develop her visual vocabulary, deepening her broader exploration of human connection.