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Katherine Bradford’s Long and Winding Road

Katherine Bradford’s journey was as unfathomable as the opaque purpled seas and dark skies in many of her paintings, but at 80, the artist, who as a young mother fled rural New England with her young children to live in New York City, has her first major museum survey this summer.

Katherine Bradford in her studio. Photographed by Erin Little.

“It is a milestone,” she says as we sit talking in her summer studio in Brunswick, Maine, on the eve of the opening for “Flying Woman: The Paintings of Katherine Bradford” at the nearby Portland Museum of Art, not far from where, as a young woman, she began painting and dreaming of being an artist.

The exhibition, curated by Jamie DeSimone, features 40 paintings created over 20-plus years, and shows how, as Bradford studied, experimented and gained confidence, she developed her own language of motifs, with seas, ships, swimming pools, skies, superheroes, swimmers in celestial and oceanic landscapes giving way to groupings of large figures. Her characteristically jewel-toned palette, though varied, is the constant, for the most part, as is the often ambiguous gender of the figures. A new book from Rizzoli that accompanies the show further illuminates Bradford’s trajectory.

The museum survey in Maine, which runs through September 11, follows a banner year that came after roughly five decades of slogging it out without steady gallery representation, and thus little public recognition or acknowledgement from the upper echelons of the art world. In 2021, Bradford unveiled her first public art commission, five permanent large-scale mosaic murals at a subway station in Manhattan; had a solo show at the Hall Foundation in Vermont; and curated there a massive exhibition entitled *Deep Blue* too, pairing her own artwork with that of major 20th and 21st century artists from the foundation’s collection. She was named the 2021 winner of the Rappaport Prize, following a stream of accolades that began when she was in her late 50s, first from the Pollock-Krasner Foundation, then the

American Academy of Arts and Letters, and then, as she began her seventh decade, a Guggenheim Fellowship and a grant from the Joan Mitchell Foundation. Bradford also has work on view, through Nov. 6, in *At First Light: Two Centuries of Artists in Maine* at the art museum of Bowdoin College, which awarded her an honorary doctorate earlier this year. Additionally, this fall Matthew Brown Gallery in Los Angeles is presenting Bradford's work as a two-person show with artist Sedrick Chisom.

Bradford's work draws not from life but from the imagination, letting the paint, and the subconscious, lead the way. There's a trademark mystique she achieves by rooting her paintings in the indeterminacy of abstraction—Mark Rothko comes up often in discussions of her style—while imbuing her figures with humanity and the humor of a talented cartoonist (she drew cartoons for the newspaper of her Connecticut high school) who knows how to convey much with light gestures and broad marks: scarcely sketched faces, boxy bodies, awkward arms. It all adds up to a kind of blink, between abstraction and figuration, and between universality and specificity of the human experience.

The departure point of the Portland Museum exhibition is "Woman Flying," (1999), from which the exhibition has adapted its title. The painting's central figure, like those in Bradford's superhero series that evolved years later, can be read as a symbol of empowerment, ebullient, aloft, and ready for the freedom of flight. Alternatively, there's something about the figure's Muppety hands and barefootedness that suggests someone surprised to be suspended in the sky and dubious about flying, let alone saving anyone. You can't tell if she's rising or falling, just as you can't tell if her swimmers, in nearby works, are lolling happily, or perhaps wading from or towards some kind of peril. Bradford identifies with the figure closely.

She describes her young adulthood mostly "in the closet" about her fierce desire not just to make art but to live "the life of an artist." She took classes where she could, painting in her barn-turned-studio, bonded with other artists in Maine and showed some work on paper at a pizza parlor behind a Hannaford grocery store in her hometown.

"I wanted my identity to be an artist. 'Oh, Katherine Bradford? She's an artist!" she says, adding, "I wanted to be a player."

But there was guilt: she'd started a family with the expectation that she would be a "political wife," she says, to a man drawn by public service and poised for public life: Peter A. Bradford, a descendant of Massachusetts's first governor, William Bradford, and a scion—through his mother—of several illustrious banking families (the Rothschilds, the Warburgs, the Schiffs) as well as of Abraham Abraham, the founder of the Brooklyn department store Abraham & Strauss, which became part of Macy's.

And she got pushback: from her husband, her children and her own parents. She has often quipped that coming out as an artist in her 30s was much harder than later "coming out as queer" in her 40s. (She met Jane O'Wyatt, now her spouse, in 1990.)

In 1979, at 37, Bradford divorced and decamped from the family farm in Maine, with her 10-year-old twins in tow, to New York City. Her sister and the kids' grandmothers all lived in the city, even as it was rounding a decade of being bleak, broken, and barreling beyond redemption, it seemed to many.

In New York, where she is still based except for summers in Maine, she painted alone when the twins were at school. In an interview she did several years ago with her son Arthur, an O. Henry Award-winning writer and Emmy-nominated filmmaker, she describes how harsh and stratified the New York art world was, and how unwelcome she felt. She commuted from Manhattan each morning by subway to a studio she eventually secured in Williamsburg—long before the Lululemons came along—where she recalls “there was one place to get food, and it was Polish food.” She mostly made her meals on a hot plate to spend every minute painting.

She was at an awkward stage of life to find a mentor, so she turned to peers and younger artists who were “ambitious and smart and seemed to have what I needed,” namely support, inspiration and guidance. She watched as some found success before she did, but “we were all cheering each other on.” Her daughter Laura, now a lawyer in New York, remembers Bradford’s friends as “grubby and penniless,” a characterization Bradford says is both true and “an authentic reaction of a child who saw her mother going in a direction that she didn’t feel [was] safe.”

Yet when Bradford had imagined it from the woods of Maine, that lifestyle was part of the appeal: “I could wear what I wanted and my friends would be wild and crazy and make me laugh. I didn't want to throw away all the more bourgeois life that I had been brought up in, but I wanted to add on to that all the fun and wildness that I thought went with being an artist. And, in fact, it did.” She remembers a dinner party in her early days in New York with a younger group of artists: “Someone brought some wine but there was no bottle opener. And so they went in the studio and got a screw gun to open the wine.” That was one of many such moments that affirmed for her, “This is the kind of life I want.” She said yes to any show that would have her: more than 100 group shows, including many curated by her younger friends and one-offs at art spaces that came and went. She feared she was, perhaps like the figures in her swimming paintings, treading water.

When her kids were teens, Bradford earned her MFA so that she could teach, which she has done notably at Yale, Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, New York’s Fashion Institute of Technology, and the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture in Maine where she describes having felt in her early days that she was, metaphorically, “just pressing my face against the screens up there” wishing she could be part of such an artistic “heaven.”

When her kids went to college, she was able to devote herself more completely to painting. In the early 1990s, through one of her young artist friends, she got to know the then-young, “scrappy” Canada gallery in New York, which finally took her on in 2015, mounting a show of her work early the next year whose opening was jam-packed with her supporters. That show, “absolutely validated the work,” she says, “it was a tremendous breakthrough.” Her family was wowed. The gallerist Amy Adams of Adams and Ollman in Portland, Oregon, began representing Bradford in 2014, and still does. She and the Canada Gallery team were all there to cheer Bradford on in Maine at the museum opening this summer.

Although “making a lot of money,” she adds, “was not on the list” of what success as an artist meant for her, she admits that it felt great to set up educational trusts for her four grandchildren. Most important to her is recognition from institutions: “Flying Woman” travels to the Frye Art Museum in Seattle next February, and the artist and her gallerists have high hopes that museums in other cities will extend the tour. Meanwhile, this year, the Brooklyn Museum became one of more than a dozen others, including the Metropolitan Museum of Art, to acquire her work.

The large-scale painting, “Mother’s Lap” (2020), which the Brooklyn Museum has now lent to the exhibition in Maine, is from a series of “mother paintings” Bradford made over the last few years that mark the first time she’s explicitly set upon the subject of motherhood. That timing suggests that perhaps it is only with the benefit of distance—well into grandparenthood—that she had the perspective to address not just the intimate physicality of motherhood, but also the import, the joy and the pain of the decisions and sacrifices, both big and small, that she, and others like her, have made as both mother and artist.

One such painting is a tumult of chaos and caring, in which two figures hold another up sideways. That painting—which became the title of a 2020 gallery show—she called “Mother Joins the Circus” (2019). “You don't want your mother to join the circus, right?” she quips, but “My kids’ mother joined the circus!”

She looks around her studio, the partially painted canvases stacked several deep and steeped in color, almost vibrating, in the Maine summer light: “Sometimes I can’t believe I did it.”