

LONDON

Katherine Bradford

CAMPOLI PRESTI

In Katherine Bradford's painting *Push Pull*, 2019, a featureless, androgynous individual is held centrally in the frame by a number of roughly hewn limbs reaching from the left and the right of the canvas. They buttress the figure in an aggressive manner but, strangely, also support and even care for it. Is this "push pull," or tug-of-war, between figure and ground a form of protection or a confrontation? Some of the other paintings in Bradford's recent exhibition "Legs and Stripes," such as *Choice of Heads*, 2019, and *Leg Hold*, 2019, ask the same question.

The former, hewn in layers of bright blues and oranges, shows a figure grasping a head by the eyes and mouth, while the latter presents a dominant female character holding another's upright leg, as an audience looks on across a red horizontal rope. These allegorical wrestling matches represent the artist's performative brawls with paint and her search for a free and relaxed rhythm of execution.

These melees point to what making paintings in 2019 might mean. Bradford has spoken of her frustration with current trends in the medium: "I see painting going in a direction I don't want. It's either too sweet or too critical." Bridging abstraction and contemporary social subjects, Bradford aims for a midpoint between these two poles—between what one might read reductively as a sternly critical "networked painting" and "vitalism" on the one side, and a folkie naïveté on the other.

With this in mind, *Prodigal Son*, 2018, with its two parents and their child bordered by vertical red stripes, required the viewer to consider simultaneously the topos of critical care and the art-historical tradition

of Color Field painting. The human characters in Bradford's work are stylized, formalized, and rendered with "right kind of wrong" klutzy elements, such as the misplaced smile on the maternal character's face. Bradford takes her distance from the flat economy and cool yet seductive emotional detachment of painters such as Alex Katz (she has previously said that she does "not do leisure-time, recreational paintings") by adding a deliberately awkward psychological aspect.

Bradford's earnest spiritual mark-making is drawn from a lineage that includes artists as diverse as Forrest Bess, Carroll Dunham, Philip Guston, A. R. Penck, and Joan Snyder, not to mention Mark Rothko, with his deep space and glowing fields of pigment. She is known for her commitment to close communities of artists that she has been part of since the early 1980s

in Maine and New York City. With this in mind, *Various Heads*, 2019, showing nine amorphous, semi-featureless portraits painted in layers to indicate ephemeral light, seemed to be a self-portrait in the collective. These heads float like idea bubbles above what could be the central figure of the artist.

Like her colleague Brian Belott, Bradford clearly recognizes the sophistication and intelligence of children's art, and her new works possess a processual honesty that points to this reevaluation of the meaning of the naive or the childlike. Her art is empathetic, direct, and transgressive, providing an antidote to the relentless smarm and insincerity of our contemporary age.

—Andrew Hunt



Katherine Bradford,
Leg Hold, 2019,
acrylic on canvas,
60 × 48".