

April 1, 2016, p. 111-112

KATHERINE BRADFORD Canada

Often little more than daubs and smears, the miniature figures populating the textured expanses of Katherine Bradford's recent paintings seem as though they might at any moment melt back into the once-formless substance that constitutes them. The sensation is not without meaning in the context of her subject matter: swimmers in various kinds of waters, from pounding ocean waves to tranquil night-lit pools. The paintings plumb a venerable theme—that of the bather, beloved of Cézanne and Renoir. Accordingly, alongside the feeling of sensuous immersion attending the subject of (near) naked humans communing with nature there exist some fundamental issues of form and representation. Still, Bradford has long been skilled at knocking grandiosity down a peg, humanizing the Ab-Ex sublime by populating her big stretches of abstract color, layer upon layer of paint, with quirky superheroes or ships glowing with tiny illuminated portholes. Hers are salt-of-the-earth American swimmers and surfers, not fancy-pants “bathers”; we identify with them, empathizing with their vulnerability and amused at their manifest awkwardness. Her work's faux naïveté brings to mind that of the all-too-canny Malcolm Morley and Philip Guston.

Fear of Waves (all works 2015 or 2016) was one of the largest canvases on view and was the sole oil (the other 10 were acrylics). It was also the showstopper. The 7-by-6-foot composition is divided roughly in half on a diagonal vertical, with giant waves heaving leftward toward a crowd of swimmers. The swimmers flee through a turquoise impasto occasionally spattered with white and dappled with patches of blue, a swath so thick with paint that their exertions are palpable. There is a broad range of effects, from sunlit surfaces to watery depths. The people—here all brunettes, their heads little more than punctuation marks—have sunburnt orange and magenta skin; some wind up under streaks of gray-blue, as though submerged. We can almost hear the shrieks of terror and delight.

Several night scenes—long Bradford's strength, suggesting as they do the realm of dreams—show swimmers under the moon and stars, or even in outer space. *Fathers* floats an oblong pool in a thick, dark heaven; ringed with bright blue and luminescent pink, this Jacuzzi-in-the-sky hosts a party of men communing in the great beyond. Three large figures stretch their bodies vertically in *Pool Swimmers, Green*; they are dressed in chaste white attire and swim straight ahead in their lanes. We see them from above, and, though no time of day is indicated, the yellowish green coloration implies night lights inside the pool. Most wacky is *Swim Team Miami*, a veritable constellation of swimmers in some celestial realm, enjoying through eternity their pink patch of water and colorful props. One figure looks as

though she is standing on a planet; another appears to crawl right through a bright blue hole in the sky.

It is precisely the figures' finitude in relation to something bigger than themselves that gives Bradford's paintings their particular pathos. To make the struggle believable, she has to make the “bigger” gorgeous and unfathomable, seductive and threatening all at once. The stakes are high, and Bradford grows ever more daring.

—Faye Hirsch



Katherine Bradford: *Fathers*, 2016, acrylic on drop cloth, 70 by 96 inches; at Canada.

