

BOMB — Artists in Conversation

Katherine Bradford by Samuel Jablon

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by Samuel Jablon

"You can't tell if they're about leisure or about horror and drowning."



Katherine Bradford, *Couples Swim*, 2015, acrylic on canvas.
All images courtesy the artist and CANADA Gallery, New York.

Katherine Bradford paints people flying, floating, and wading in a range of environments, from outer space to sandy beaches. The paintings in her 2016 exhibition *Fear of Waves* at CANADA were joyful, sad, gritty, and filled with a fear of what circles under the surface.

Bradford and I sat down in her studio and had a conversation about art and how community is necessary to survive as an artist. We discussed her paintings of swimmers and the need for monsters to become part of the narrative.

Katherine Bradford A friend of mine named Peter Acheson wrote on Facebook that he thought I was doing paintings of white people standing in shallow water, and I thought, I don't like the word "shallow" associated with my work.

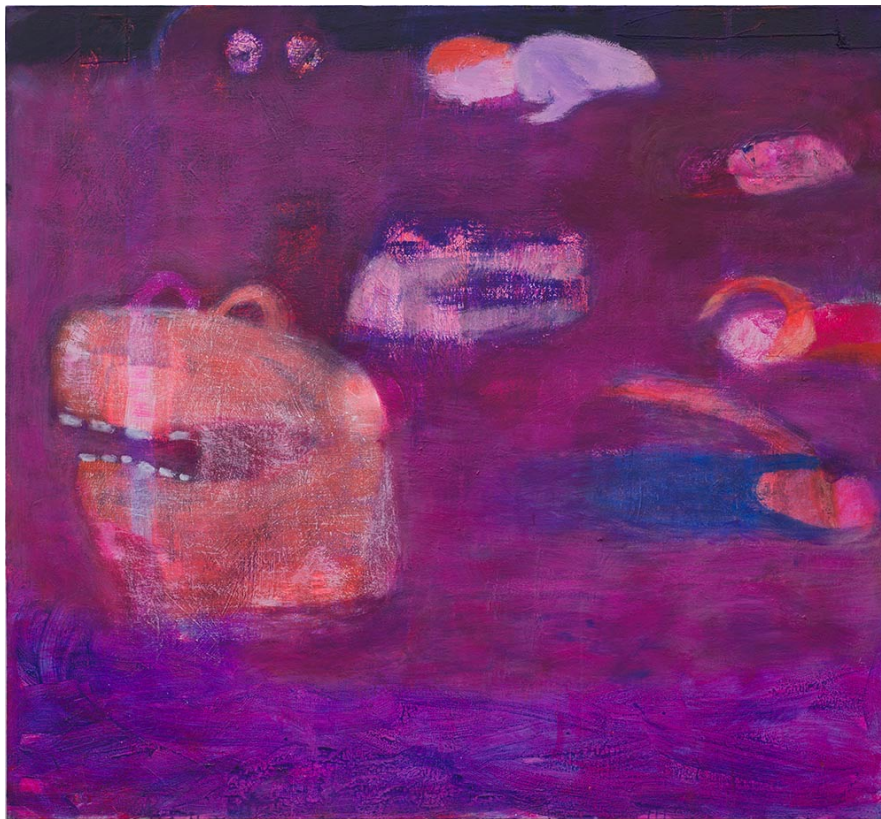
Samuel Jablon They're more like pink people.

KB Yeah, well I asked him what he meant, and he said he thought it was a good critique of what's going on: white people are just not going to the bottom. They're standing aloof in shallow

water. If you think of water as the subconscious, which the Freudians do, then all the things on the bottom of the ocean, the octopuses and monsters and real... grit... are all deep down. And yet we're all standing around, wading in the shallows. And I thought that, whether it's true or not, I certainly didn't intend this interpretation of my paintings. I just thought it was an interesting comment.

SJ It's really interesting—is that why you started adding monsters to your swimmer paintings?

KB Yes, I thought, "I'm going to paint what's in the bottom of the ocean"; I'm going to have that in my paintings, so it's not all people at the beach. The large magenta ocean painting I had in the summer show at CANADA had alligator and hippo-like monsters floating with the swimmers.



Large Ocean Painting, 2016, acrylic on canvas with canvas collage.

SJ I like that a lot.

KB I wanted to distance myself from Alex Katz and not do leisure time, recreational paintings.

SJ Well, there's something very haunting about these figures.

KB What do you think it is?

SJ There's no face, and no real features... there's something very elusive about them.

KB So they're more like the everyman?

SJ They're more like ghosts, actually.

KB Maybe it's the light?

SJ What do you mean by that?

KB The light of the painting—they're lit up, ephemeral maybe.

SJ You can't tell if they're about leisure or about horror and drowning.

KB I'm not into horror. I was going to put a face on one person in one of the little paintings. I was just getting ready to when Sarah Braman, an artist and one of the founding members of CANADA, came to my studio. She was rummaging through my paintings and just picked out that little one because she thought it would be good to show. And then I realized it didn't need a face. It was better without it.

SJ Much better without a face. That's eerie!

KB But sometimes that happens; people make your paintings better than they are by liking them when you actually haven't finished.

SJ I think sometimes it actually takes a while to really see a completed work.

KB Yes, it does. You know, I'm beginning to think that's the "talent" we all talk about. Talent is certainly not defined by skillful drawing anymore. But I think knowing when to stop, knowing when you have a work of art in front of you, now that takes a special kind of eye. And in order to be able to do that you have to be pretty savvy about what's going on. Because the degree of unfinished work out there changes. I mean right now there's a lot of under-finished work.

SJ Yeah, but that's trending.

KB Still, it may be an interesting moment in the conversation.

SJ That's a good way to look at it. In your studio now there's all these paintings that seem to reference outer space, stars, and gravity. Can you talk about that a little bit?

KB Well, right as I was getting ready to sew up the work for the CANADA show, I stumbled on the idea that I could make the swimmers be swimming in outer space, like the painting of men sitting around a wading pool, which I put in a star-filled night sky.

SJ That was my favorite from the show. That and a little one where there were two people kind of floated.

KB That was situated in outer space, too. But why? Why did you like those two?

SJ I couldn't place them, as they seemed so simple and up front, but then the more you looked the more odd and elusive and unique they became. You couldn't really pin them down. Are these two people swimming? Did these two people just die...



Fathers, 2013-2016, acrylic on drop cloth.

KB I was kind of embarrassed because these two swimmers were so awkward—

SJ They're very awkward.

KB I put the acrylic paint very lightly over an oil painting that I didn't like, and that's why it's all beady. It made a very interesting surface that looked otherworldly. And this—I don't know if that's a planet or a sun—I'm not intentionally doing, but when I find them I pay attention. And it's good we're talking about it now because it'll make me more aware of some of these things after they happen.

SJ So what interests you about people floating?

KB I can't give you a good answer to that. I think it's sort of a buoyancy that I liked in the Superman figure, too. He was flying, and I liked him best that way.

SJ I can see that. I know the series.

KB Rick Briggs said to me, "You know, you really do your best painting when..." and then I thought, "Yes! Yes, oh God, I can't wait to hear this." And he said, "...when you're relaxed." And I thought, "Oh no, when I'm relaxed!?" I mean, that's so hard, probably the hardest thing! Like, don't try too hard, and yet be focused, but of course we're all trying hard.

SJ Everything feels very competitive all the time.

KB We do it to ourselves, too. I mean, let's say you've worked on a painting for a long time and it's not going well, and the last thing you feel is relaxed. I have to fool myself into it. Sometimes at the end of the day I do some quick moves, and they turn out to be good, because I'm in shape. But maybe the floating figure is that person who has let go, who's not trying too hard.

SJ Yeah, I like that.

KB Believe me it's not a conscious idea. I don't paint from ideas, and I suppose you don't either. It's probably half and half.

SJ Definitely half and half. There's a chunk of time where I'm writing the phrases and that's pretty conscious, as well as how they get laid out. But once I start painting it all just tumbles together.

KB And all you have to do is just change one letter and it's different. What was nice was your biggest one, the one you chose for the card, the gold one. You know why? Because the letters took up so much room, so it was very abstract.

SJ I agree. That was a really hard painting, but at that point I was relaxed—or, I guess, exhausted. I didn't really care, and gave myself a lot of freedom to just make a painting.

KB Maybe that's what happened with the swimming pool and the sky, with the last painting I did before the show. I was hoping I could have a big painting in the show, but if it didn't turn out, I'd already done others. Probably you felt the same.

SJ Exactly the same. I'm getting ready for a show now in LA, and I want to do all new work for it, but there's paintings that can go into it if I'm not ready. When you have a backup, it takes a lot of the pressure off, of course.

KB I would never be one of those people who work up to the last moment with eight paintings that have to be in the show. That's just way too much pressure.

SJ I couldn't do that either. I would freeze.

KB And also, it doesn't sound like much fun.

SJ Do you still make sculptures, or are they kind of gone?

KB I'd like to, but this whole year has been about making these paintings. When I think of painting, I think of making something, not of painting exactly. I think of making a physical object, and that's helpful, because then I don't get so precious about the way I put the paint on.

SJ My approach is very similar.

KB You know, when I started painting in Brooklyn, my studio was on one floor of this crappy building and Chris Martin's was on the other. So I saw all his early, giant paintings. I always felt like he was trying to dominate us, which I didn't like. Now I feel he's learned how to make a painting that looms over us but is sublime and endearing. Chris loved standing in front of something enormous. It's not an addiction I ever had, did you?

SJ No. I like the intimacy of the small, sort of head-size painting. These paintings in your studio are kind of the perfect size. How big are they?

KB They're seventy-two inches tall.



Upright Swimmers with Mother, 2016, acrylic on canvas.

SJ It's very human-size.

KB I'm into human. When are you going to start putting figures in you work?

SJ (laughter) Not yet...

KB There's Katherine Bernhardt's paintings in Make Painting Great Again at CANADA, she's got figures—the Simpsons. And Keltie Farris, she flops herself down with paint on her, and makes a print of her body in some of her work.

SJ There's a lot of such work that's seemingly extremely personal, like Nicole Eisenman's.

KB Yeah, like Nicole Eisenman, who is dominating the art world right now.

SJ She's great because her work evolves. The worst thing to do is to hold on to some way of working that doesn't change.

KB There has to be exploration in the work, not just a production. After my show at CANADA, Phil Grauer came over—he's one of the founders of CANADA—and said, "Look, if you're going to make good work, make it now. And just because you sell work doesn't mean it's good, so put that out of your mind." And then he motioned to this one painting and said, "See, this painting over here? We could never show this painting in the gallery." And I looked at the painting he was talking about and all of a sudden it just looked awful, shriveled up, like the shoes in *The Wizard of Oz* just before they disappeared under the house. I realized it was a horrible painting, and I better shape up quick.

SJ Sometimes you just need to realize when the painting is awful.

KB Let me tell you, I got rid of it pretty fast.

Samuel Jablon is an artist based in New York City.

<http://bombmagazine.org/article/1538107/katherine-bradford>