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KATHERINE BRADFORD *Fear of Waves*

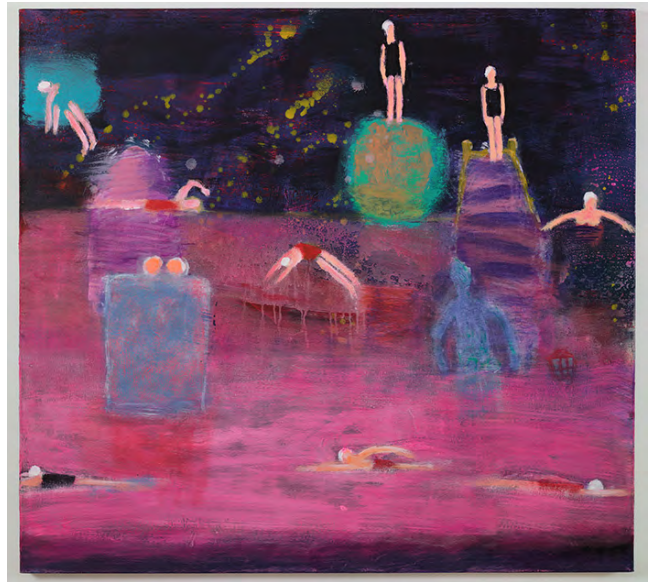
by Hearne Pardee

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The anonymous bathers in Katherine Bradford's *Fear of Waves* recall graphic novelist Scott McCloud's observation that the simplified characters in comics encourage immediate identification on the part of the reader. Long involved with the watery unconscious, with nocturnal seas and psychedelic skies, Bradford likewise encourages immersive fantasies. There's a recreational theme to her new exhibition, a shift away from monumental ocean liners and sinking Titanics, but like the amusement parks evoked by her festive lights, it promises some scary fun. Enticing us with liquid surfaces of turquoise and pink, Bradford casts an ironic eye on conventional beach scenes, as water threatens to overflow and submerge us. But if she makes topical reference to climate change, Bradford sets it in a larger artistic context, viewing its all too immediate threats in terms of poetry's traditional concern for our place in the universe.

We experience Bradford's paintings internally as much as visually. Her elongated, faceless swimmers recall Pierre Bonnard's nudes, suspended in luminous bathtubs; they appeal to our proprioceptive sense of weightlessness in water, to the pleasurable exertion of swimming, and to the cheerful mindlessness of group activities. The casual back and forth of the horizontal swimmers in *Floaters* (2015) provides a humorous leitmotif to the show; in *Couples Swim* (2015) they underscore the oblivion of these hedonistic pleasure seekers to the sublime heavenly display just over the horizon.

Bradford leaves us little alternative to immersion, as her vertically distorted compositions deny us any external



Katherine Bradford, *Swim Team Miami*, 2015. Acrylic on canvas, 44 × 48 inches (111.76 × 121.92 cm). Courtesy the artist and Canada Gallery.

point of view. We float uneasily, as if in a dream, before the watery red wall of *Surf Party* (2015). Bradford specializes in such disconnects. The racers in *Pool Swimmers, Green* (2015), viewed from above and behind, seem suspended like the figure of Superman in her earlier works, while to identify with the figures in *Blue Swimmers* (2015) is to bathe in translucent layers of paint.

To some extent, Bradford partakes of the whimsical sublimity of Wayne Thiebaud's "Memory Mountains," and his arbitrarily composed beach scenes teeming with figures. In the painting *Fear of Waves* (2015) that gives the show its title, the swarming bathers seem as much in danger of falling off the vertically tilted beach as of being swept away by oncoming breakers. But Bradford harks back further, to her roots in Maine—the dark, romantic tradition of Hartley and Ryder lurks beneath her shimmering surfaces. Beyond allusions to Hartley's seascapes, such as the white foam, dark sky and lobster-red figures of *Surfer* (2015), there are associations to the tragic allegory of *Nine Bell's Folly* (1933), his striking nocturnal commemoration of the poet Hart Crane's suicide at sea, featuring eyes in the waves and apocalyptic commotion in the sky. In it Hartley alludes to Crane's poem *At Melville's Tomb*: "Frosted eyes there were that lifted altars; / And silent answers crept across the stars."

Crane's poem evokes the coloristic abandon of *Swim Team Miami* (2015), which blends the vernacular and sacred: sea merges with sky and what might indeed be an altar rises from the water, along with a spectral figure that could be a beach toy, as swimmers perch on glowing celestial spheres. Bradford shares Bonnard's penchant for saturated colors that veer into the visionary. She varies layers of orange, rose and magenta, applied both thick and thin, in contrast to lime green and turquoise, while ecstatic drips and splashes seem generated by the exuberant play of the figures.

This blend of sensual materiality and internally generated imagery goes back to Philip Guston, who developed his own practice of Abstract Expressionism in the 1970s, after it had become arid and cosmetic in color-field abstraction: an exuberant, visceral painting, based in sheer love of paint-inspired imagery, freed from the strictures of abstraction and depiction but open to both. Like Guston, and Bonnard, Bradford brings an impulsive, free-associative approach to her subjects, but also a strong formal intelligence that captures, edits and organizes forms within the flotsam of her liquid fields. Her surfaces are close in spirit to George McNeil's, another Abstract Expressionist who embraced the figure and spoke of making surfaces "totally sensate."

If *Fear of Waves* remains fairly literal in its references. *Fathers* (2016), the most recent work in the show, engages in complex irony. Here, adults have opted out of the thrill of dangerous play in favor of a kiddie pool—or magic carpet—for ritualistic male bonding; perhaps these are our political leaders. There's a suggestion of psychic transport, yet also gentle mockery of attempts to escape the human condition. As rising seas inspire us to consider colonizing other planets, Bradford playfully extends her fantasies of immersion into the universe at large with *Swim Team Outer Space* (2015). Here, in explicit acknowledgement of all that lies beyond, the swimmers cease their to-and-fro and pause to contemplate the moonlit sky. Playing on the disconnect between cosmic spectacle and vernacular pleasure that runs throughout the show, it broadens the metaphorical reach of Bradford's

“swim team”—and by extension, painting itself—to embrace all our collective efforts to confront and domesticate the unknown.



Katherine Bradford, *Fathers*, 2016. Acrylic on drop cloth, 70 × 96 inches (177.80 × 243.84 cm). Courtesy the artist and Canada Gallery.