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Flying Woman: The Paintings of Katherine Bradford

"Full circle" is the phrase that comes to mind apropos Katherine Bradford's exhibition *Flying Women* at the Portland Museum of Art. Organized by Jaime DeSimone, these forty or so paintings span twenty-two years of her life as an artist, an existence that began much earlier in Maine when she was a wife and mother of young twins. Now eighty, she has triumphantly returned, a grandmother with a wife of her own.

A textbook-like timeline in one pocket of the show maps out dates and notable events from Bradford's life, highlighting her unusual backstory. She attended privileged educational institutions for young women—Miss Porter's School and Bryn Mawr College, married a Yale law graduate descended from Mayflower Pilgrims, moved to Maine among the wave of seventies back-to-the-land-ers, and became a mother. When the voice of her true calling became deafening, Bradford divorced, relocated to New York in 1979 with her son and daughter, and figured out how to become the artist she wanted to be in the community she wanted to join. This toggling between attending to her needs as an individual and her needs for connection to family and community is articulated in her own words in the wall labels but more importantly is manifest in the paintings.



Katherine Bradford, *Mother Ship*, 2006. Oil on canvas, 30 x 24 inches. Collection of William Finn and Arthur Salvador. © Katherine Bradford. Photo: Stephen Petegorsky Photography.

The oldest and newest among the six of her superhero paintings included here encapsulate this dichotomy. In *Woman Flying* (1999), the marquee image for this show, Bradford's mature putto on leave from a fresco masquerades in a hero's cape. It's an economical emblem for her struggle to "fly." She describes feeling "exposed," "vulnerable," uncertain that her aspirations were within her grasp as an artist. In comparison to her younger, better-credentialed peers, schooled in color theory and figure drawing, Bradford may have felt underequipped. Yet she did have a superpower: her way of devising images equal parts prose and poetry. It is on point again in *Superheroes* (2020). This painting features four women in freak-flag outfits of tights, skirts and mismatched socks. But despite their individualistic garb, they share one red cape. Is Bradford suggesting we are stronger together?

Throughout this exhibition there is an echo of eighties figuration. In Bradford's early days in New York, that loose category of painting was everywhere in galleries and magazines. Her

flying figures, nocturnal scenes and saturated colors recall Robert Yarber's and her *Woman in Water* (1999) nods to the scumbled outlines, color fields and minor figure-cropping utilized by Susan Rothenberg (whose Skowhegan lecture Bradford attended in 1975). It is also not a stretch to connect her poetic allegories to Francesco Clemente's. But Bradford is William Carlos Williams to Clemente's Ezra Pound. The underpinnings of Bradford's paintings are her life and world, while Clemente has ranged into borrowings from far-flung cultures, the Mughal Empire, for example. Bradford's most exotic subject may be her ships which, if you are in Maine, isn't saying much.

What distinguishes Bradford's usage is the ships seem to function as persona. After all, woman as vessel is a cliché. Ships use she/her pronouns, go on maiden voyages, discharge people and cargo from their holds, and sailors navigate by the stars. Her *Mother Ship* (2006) depicts swimmers returning to safety as fledglings return to the nest. In *Sargasso* (2012), a container ship is tethered to the ocean surface by strings of lights. The tableau recalls Macy's parade balloons anchored by multiple ropes. Escaping the confines of land—or not—is one of Bradford's main themes: boats and swimmers float, superheroes fly or try.

The latest paintings yield something different, a sense of arrival. Bradford's changeover from oils to acrylics, complete by 2016, brought with it adjustments in tactics. For example, Bradford could choose to paint on raw instead of primed canvas. Since canvas can't be unstained, and the window for manipulating a layer of acrylic is shorter, sureness and speed count. Never second-guessing herself. Bradford simply veils an oops, like the ghostly Guston shoe in *Fear of Shoes* (2018), and forges ahead with another swath of thinned color. She isn't fussy. Once she has given you enough information to make an image readable, she moves on. Polish? Virtuosity? Nope. Bradford's gift with paint lies in her take-it-or-leave-it frankness. Her clunky figures are largely vertical or horizontal. Bent limbs form ninety degree angles. The images are rarely set in receding space and instead are gridded on the picture plane.

As Bradford reached her stride, her figures exploded from doll-sized to monumental. With multiple figures in shared activities, content became more overtly about connection and also more direct such that when she paints herself she is unapologetic - no longer cloaked in a cape or rendered ship-shaped. In *Mother Paintings*, her latest New York show, Bradford emphasized how we are bonded. This is provocative in itself. Aren't we more used to contemporary culture lamenting our existential solitude? *Motherhood* (2021) is one of Bradford's recent lap-sitter paintings, images redolent of the safety and comfort to which we all at some level wish to return, and resonant especially in the dark days of the pandemic.

In *Couple No Shirts* (2018) Bradford's journey toward life's sweet spot seems to have achieved its apogee. It is the antithesis of the vulnerability in *Woman Flying*. In the newer painting, two blue-haired women sit next to each other. One, shirtless and cross-legged, affectionately drapes her arm across the other's shoulder while the other faces the viewer with her blouse open, nipples visible. Finding oneself unexpectedly shirtless in public is the stuff of anxiety dreams for many women. Yet these two are depicted as relaxed and assured and, moreover, the way Bradford has painted them is equally relaxed and assured.

Enviably on all counts.