

# Katherine Bradford

- American, b. 1942, New York
- lives and works in New York and Maine
- 1987 MFA, SUNY Purchase; 1964 BA in art history, Bryn Mawr College
- Represented by Canada gallery, New York



## Body of Work

Katherine Bradford is an artist and educator who has taught at Illinois State University, Ohio State University, College of New Rochelle and SUNY Purchase. She was a founding member of the Union of Maine Visual Artists in 1975, which among other activities mounted exhibitions that gave some members their first opportunities to show their work. Although during her early years in Maine she was producing mostly abstract paintings, by the time she had her first solo show in New York at the Victoria Munroe Gallery in Soho in 1989, her work had changed. As she explained in a 2007 interview in *The Brooklyn Rail*, “If you want to ask me point blank why I stopped being an abstract painter and reintroduced images into my work I can tell you. It was because I wanted more emotion and I wanted to tell stories.”

Bradford’s featureless characters occupy ambiguous spaces and may appear to be lost in some sort of predicament, possibly social or bureaucratic situations. The artists includes details such as power suits and ties, high heeled shoes and hijabs, which signal identity. In a 2017 interview with *New American Paintings*, she stated, “I think [we artists are] trying to speak a language, a visual language, and it takes a long time to develop a very personal vocabulary. It certainly took me years and years to find my own voice. And I wouldn’t say it has anything to do with age; it had to do with sticking to it, and doing it a lot, like an athlete. At the same time, it doesn’t mean that you know what you are doing—you just have to trust in being the blind mole...I think most people see the figures first and try and explain to themselves what’s going on, to get the sense of it, which often they don’t find. But, I think it helps if you look at it as something made... something that is built with paint. Coming at it from a more abstract point of view is helpful although not everyone can do that.”

Her works have been exhibited at The Modern Art Museum Fort Worth, Texas; MoMA PS 1, New York; the Brooklyn Museum, New York; the Portland Museum of Art, Maine; the Addison Gallery of American Art, Massachusetts; the Weatherspoon Gallery, North Carolina; and the University of the Arts, Philadelphia. She has been honored with an award from the American Academy of Arts and Letters, a Pollock-Krasner Foundation Grant, a Joan Mitchell Foundation Grant and a Guggenheim Fellowship. Her work is in the permanent collections of New York City’s Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Brooklyn Museum, and the New York Public Library; the Wooster Art Museum, Ohio; the Portland Museum of Art, Maine; the Portland Museum of Art, Oregon; Farnsworth Museum, Maine; Smith College Museum, Massachusetts; Bryn Mawr College, Pennsylvania; the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Philadelphia; and the University of Delaware.

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A man wearing a red cape is bathed in green light, the same green as the tie that accents his business suit, incomplete because this man has no pants. To the left, standing in profile to face the caped figure, are a woman wearing a hijab and a young man with a blue head and blue-black limbs. To the right, a swimming man crashes the back of his neck and shoulders directly into the caped figure, to no effect. Katherine Bradford has made many paintings of superheroes, often of Superman in flight, hovering uncertainly, almost abject. In *Green Tie* (2018), by contrast, the heroic figure is solidly planted with both feet on the ground, apparently oblivious to the people around him. While I always felt sympathy for Bradford's vulnerable superheroes, this guy in the dress suit is Trumpian, full of himself yet naked from the waist down. It is a darker look at the hero, who now seems disinclined to help anyone. There is something pathetic in this caped crusader's disconnection from the people in whose midst he stands.

Another man in a suit sits atop (or behind) a gun, his left hand resting on a white ball denoting snow or a fluffy mass of cotton. His expression is disturbed, even angry. A stack of white balls rests on the gun, with four more balls below. The man has an air of paranoia: he needs the gun to protect himself and his vast fortune of snowballs. The painting's title, *Stock Pile* (2018), hints that the painting addresses the ways we convince ourselves we are safe, whether with weapons or by amassing objects, objects whose uselessness was made famously plain by David Hammons's 1983 performance *Bliz-aaard Ball Sale* in which he sold snowballs on a New York City winter sidewalk. No wonder this man looks so frail seated on his gun, as unsteady as the suspended Superman, and as vulnerable as the hero without pants.

Bradford is developing an artistic kinship with Susan Rothenberg, in part through the two artists' loose brushwork and large fields of color, but mostly through the enigmatic relationships in their paintings. Whereas in the past Bradford showed plausible, if open ended, situations (a ship at sea, swimmers in the water), her canvases are now surreal and hallucinatory. People levitate in the air instead of merely floating in water. But maybe this isn't so strange. Air, water, and wet paint are all governed by fluid dynamics; all three are liquid equivalents in Bradford's art, situating her emotionally charged scenes. Bradford's figures are archetypes whose appearance is an annunciation of our present societal dilemmas, particularly as they relate to male power and its growing instability. It strikes me that in the latest works we are seeing protagonists' thoughts materialize around them. In *Talk* (2017), two disembodied male heads bloviate as they float in space (they are spewing poison, really). These heads may represent what is on the mind of the woman swimming at the painting's bottom edge. Perhaps as she takes her night swim her mind turns back to the news anchors' drivel that afternoon (American politics since 2016 has us all thinking far too much about jabbering men).

In *Suits* (2018), a hulking man in a gray suit extends horizontally across the painting's entire top margin, while below him a smaller man, looking feeble in swim trunks, stands ankle deep in water. Is the horizontal figure, literally on top, looming large in the mind of the standing one? The juxtaposition of these two men in their very different suits condenses into a single image the pathos and pain of William Kentridge's two alter-egos, the pin-striped industry magnate Soho Eckstein and the naked Felix Teitlebaum (1989-2003). While Bradford's images relate to real power relations such as patriarchal privilege and masculine insecurity, they also represent our inner worlds, just as Eckstein and Teitlebaum reflect South African society while being two halves of a psychological whole.

*Men In Search of Solace* (2018) shows three red-haired white men in bathing suits standing in the shallows of a lake, just off the pier. The balding fellow on the far right is the

oldest, perhaps the father of the other two (in 2016 Bradford painted a female family trio in the water, *Upright Swimmers with Mother*). Who are these stargazers, seen only from behind? They look into the night sky, and in the context of Bradford's recent output, I believe they are like so many of us: searching for answers.

Daniel Gerwin, artist, Los Angeles