

## *Caroline Wells Chandler on Katherine Bradford*



Katherine Bradford, Prize Fighter, 2015, Acrylic on canvas, 80" x 68"

The first time Katherine Bradford came to my studio I thought she was messing with me. I had recently graduated from Yale's painting program and was feeling pretty down with a bad case of post grad school malaise. I was having a hard time navigating how to balance art and life in New York on top of recently coming out to my friends and family. She leaned in, peering over her glasses, and said to me, 'Well we're just a bunch of animals in here.' I was scandalized and I thought it was a trap. I couldn't believe that I had finally met an experienced painter that valued object making and intuition over propping up work with academically sanctioned theory. She said this shortly after telling me that one of her favorite movies from childhood was *Giant*, starring Rock Hudson and Elizabeth Taylor. That movie informed her idea of what Texans were like. It was revealed at some point in our visit that my mother's family was from Texas and that I had also done time there. Katherine looked around my studio and said, 'It feels like there's a big Texas personality in here,' and then she did the most unbelievable thing and bellowed the best 'Yeehawwww' I have ever heard from a New Englander. Bewildered and delighted, I was hooked. I couldn't believe that my favorite living painter, which I don't think she likes me to say, was indeed an awesome badass. Slowly Katherine and I have become friends, maybe because I've borderline harassed her via email. I've probably written more about her work in our online exchange than I have about any other artist because her paintings continue to surprise me, and I like that.

Katherine started painting about forty years ago as an abstract blunt mark maker and more recently she has moved towards the figure. She relocated to New York in the 80's

as a single mom with two school aged kids to live a Bohemian life and be a painter. Most recently Katherine was appointed Senior Critic at Yale. I hope she is able to help her students find their own freedom as she did with me and so many countless other artists whom she has touched with her work and choice to live an authentic life.

In Katherine's paintings lumpy superheroes defy gravity, ships toot along determined to reach their destiny, the vastness of paint splattered night skies morph into Rothkoesque oceans, fathers soak in hot tubs surfing in outer space, friends swim together, and frogs scream for their lives. The latter is a secret painting and a favorite of Chris Martin and Peter Acheson.



Katherine Bradford, Uvula, 2014, Oil on canvas, 36" x 20"

Katherine works with a treasure trove of culturally loaded signifiers. Superheroes, swimmers, ships, astronauts, arenas, time keepers, and the Titanic are a few recurring motifs in her prolific output of work. The poet and critic John Yau has described her work as being a 'meditation on masculinity.' I tend to think of some of these nameable buoys in her paint fields as destabilized archetypes of white male heroism. She will never admit it, but sometimes I suspect that her paintings are self portraits. Her daughter Laura agreed with me when I asked her about that at Katherine's blockbuster solo show after party. This sentiment especially rings true for Prize Fighter (2015) which portrays a shirtless boxer raising neon green gloves victoriously at night. I'm convinced that it's Katherine in her astral body feeling good about working her ass off in the studio. There aren't fixed rules for looking at Katherine's work. Sometimes the pink figures in her paintings transcend race and gender. Her figures make me think of the humanizing

pink in Trenton Doyle Hancock's paintings, which reminds us that we are all pink on the inside.



Katherine Bradford, Blue Swimmers, 2015, Acrylic on canvas, 60" x 48"

Katherine's paintings are allegories for spirituality within the human experience. They make us feel as if we are part of something larger than ourselves. They help us cope with the less pleasant parts of the individual such as painter's ego or the very American idea, 'too big to fail.' One of the weirdest paintings in her 2016 show at Canada, Blue Swimmers (2015), felt like death. In context with the other works in the show it placed us on the inside of the painting looking through as if we had crossed over or perhaps we are about to cross over. I suspect that Katherine is able to achieve a wide range of interpretations of experience because she allows her paintings to be what they need to be. Katherine paints in service to what the work requires.

I am the steward of five of Katherine's paintings. Superman Responds Ship (2014) is one of my favorite paintings because of the way it makes me feel. I get to enjoy my coffee with it in the morning. Many of Katherine's titles tend to list an object or action. This title does both. In just about every experience I've had with one of Katherine's rorschachian paintings I am never told what to think, which leaves me wondering: what am I to make of the image?

Katherine's paint is always dynamic. Her paintings have a freewheeling curiosity and this is most evident in the mark and the application of the paint, which is used differently in just about every painting. Recognizable imagery in her work is culled out of

preexisting marks and veils of paint. I've never seen Katherine paint, but I imagine that she stares at her paint until the marks cause her to hallucinate and see what needs to be there. I think there is a lot of bravery in that.



Katherine Bradford, Superman Responds Ship, 2014, Oil on canvas, 18" x 24"

Superman Responds Ship as a painting in and of itself is captivating. When it is contextualized in the larger body of work that Katherine has made, it moves me even more. Somehow it appears as if the Titanic and the iceberg have reconciled and joined as one. It is in the realm of the *coincidentia oppositorum*, a Latin phrase that means the unity of opposites, that Katherine works her magic. When I look at this painting my forehead gets heavy. I feel like I'm being shaktipata'd by a swirled ying yanged berg-ship that glows like something not from this world.

The best looking beaded up aqua water that anyone could hope for rests at the bottom of the painting. There are also some wonderful white paint splatters that look like stars or moons. I like that I can't tell if they were intentional or if the painting happened to be in the line of fire when she was working on another piece.

Above the ship seven supermen respond. I can't tell if they are floating, soaring above, rising out of the sea, undergoing baptism, or descending below. Perhaps it's one superman moving in a Muybridge fashion. I don't know and I'm okay with that. This painting makes me feel okay with not knowing. Like so many of Katherine's paintings, Superman Responds Ship lets us feel at home with the mystery of being alive. Perhaps that's why her work makes me cry.



Caroline Wells Chandler, Super Painter Impersonator, 2015, Hand crocheted assorted wool, 36" x 53"

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