

Katherine Bradford

Lifeguards

kaufmann repetto is happy to present *Lifeguards*, Katherine Bradford's first solo exhibition with the gallery.

Katherine Bradford's mesmerizing yet rigorous visual language freely traverses the relationship between nonobjective and representational painting, allowing potential narratives to unfold and interweave with the investigation of form and color.

In Bradford's exhibition, *Lifeguards*, we find ourselves immersed in a world of vast expanses of color depicting water and sky, populated by bathers and swimmers. Shades of blue ranging from cobalt to azure, and ultramarine to turquoise, divide the canvas into distinct horizontal planes, while the variations in saturation and tone evoke an elusive yet palpable atmosphere. Lighter and darker hues are interchangeable and used without functional or hierarchical distinction. Subtle modulations of pale lavender and warm purple represent beaches, to then resurface in other works depicting body limbs. An indigo-blue firmament merges into an equally saturated body of sapphire-colored water, as if the two elements were soaking into each other by mutual consent. The compositional strategy is diversified; some paintings are limited to two dominating color fields, while in others the presence of red, white or yellow stripes introduces additional spatial elements such as the seafloor or the pool deck. These nearly monochromatic backgrounds are occupied by an array of swimmers who float in the air or plunge into the water, while others are gathered ashore. Their androgynous, featureless bodies are roughly sketched in bold colors representing their sun-tanned skins, which vary from pale rosy to pink, from glowing salmon to cool purple. Often the positions of these figures are fantastical and absurd, an effect reinforced by erratic manipulations of the pictorial perspective. We encounter two swimmers hovering majestically in horizontal expanses of washy blue in the upper half of the canvas; others are captured in the moment of jumping, head first, into the water, immortalized in awkward angular body postures. In contrast to these whimsical-almost funny-poses, the lifeguards who give the show its title, are sitting on or standing next to their towers, whose three-dimensional verticality interrupts the otherwise predominantly flat image compositions. Two guards are depicted while performing life-saving measures: a man is pulling a swimmer out of the water, grasping him vigorously by the legs, while a female lifeguard carries the body of a rescued person—a motionless silhouette of unnatural bluish pallor—in her arms. Art historical references are strongly resonant in these figure groups, evoking biblical subject matters such as Saint John the Baptist and the Pietà. Further, the dual nature of the title of the show, "life" and "guard", is literal in these works, alluding to the lifeguard's task of taking care of other human beings, or the lifeguard as savior.

While the oscillation between abstract and figurative elements captures and ensnares the viewer, giving way to multiple readings, it is also a key to the wider scope of Bradford's artistic research. Focused on abstract painting in the early phase of her career, over the past two decades the artist has opened her practice to depiction, without losing focus on her abiding interest in the

[more abstract nature] of the color-field. Her love for the painterly comes across clearly; however, driven by an unbiased curiosity, she allows her imagery to acquire a porous malleability where a pictorial sign becomes a signifier. The first brusquely painted marks that manifested themselves as objects within the realm of colors were ships, planets and UFOs. Human beings floating in horizontal position, in the guise of gravity-defying superheroes and swimmers, soon appeared on the scene: suspended in the fathomless depth of oceans and starry nights, these quirky characters seem to oscillate between unrestrained freedom and melancholic solipsism. Over the past couple of years, the weight of the harsh political situation and, lately, the impact of the Covid pandemic, prompted the artist to deepen themes of social relations among human beings, a concern that also reflects her long-standing commitment to artists' communities in New York and Maine. The investigation of more complex figure groups is at the center of her most recent bodies of work, with *Mother*, the exhibition at Canada Gallery in New York, and the current *Lifeguards* show in Milano. "I'm doing people, but I'm really emphasizing a universality", says the artist, "I feel that's important, that I'm exploring who we are, how we fit in, how we fit in together visually, how we all stand next to each other."

Insouciant vis-à-vis the formal constraints of cultural production for a long part of her career, Bradford has honed her practice over four decades, maturing into a nonacademic, creative freedom that resonates deeply with the aesthetic and socio-political concerns of our time. Her position seems to epitomize the "liquid modernity" theorized by the sociologist Zygmunt Bauman, who advocates that after the dissolution of the 'solid' axioms of modernism—such as rationality and the chase of perfection—we have arrived in a more 'light' and 'liquid' modernity, where "change is the only permanence, and uncertainty the only certainty". It is the commitment to dynamic change and to the fluid state of human togetherness that Bradford—with a small wink and a large dose of humor—so poignantly expresses in her radiant liquid fields.

Katherine Bradford (b. 1942, New York) lives and works in New York. She started painting at the age of 30 while living in Maine and was among a group of artists who moved to Williamsburg, Brooklyn in the 1980's. Her work has been exhibited internationally at the Tang Teaching Museum, Skidmore College, New York (2020); Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art, in Bentonville (2019); The Brooklyn Museum, New York; the Modern Art Museum in Fort Worth, Texas (2017); MoMA P.S. 1 (2007) and at the Ogden Museum in Prospect.4: the New Orleans Biennial. Her work is included in collections such as The Metropolitan Museum of Art, The Brooklyn Museum, The Dallas Museum of Art, The Menil Collection in Houston, The Nerman Museum of Contemporary Art in Overland Park and the Portland Museum of Art. Bradford is the recipient of a Guggenheim Fellowship and a Joan Mitchell Grant. She has taught at institutions such as the Yale School of Art, Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture, and the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Philadelphia. In 2022, Bradford will be the subject of a touring survey show organized by the Portland Museum of Art, Maine.