Wonderful Worlds

The American painter Katherine Bradford talks about her mysterious landscapes

Katherine Bradford's paintings are magical microcosms in which miniature figures are enveloped by vast, starry skies and bottomless seas. In these philosophical scenes, where humans surrender themselves to awe-inspiring landscapes, and joy and wonder is as present as fear and vulnerability, the personal fuses with the monumental.

Bradford received a BA from Bryn Mawr College, Pennsylvania, and a MFA from the State University of New York, Purchase. She has been awarded prestigious artist grants from the Pollock-Krasner Foundation and Joan Mitchell Foundation, a Guggenheim Fellowship and an award from the American Academy of Arts and Letters.

Although the artist has maintained a long-term following throughout her career – especially within the painting communities of New York and Maine, where she holds a prominent place – Bradford, who was born in New York and grew up in Connecticut, has recently, at the age of seventy-four, become something of a sensation. Her exhibition in 2016 at the revered artist-run space Canada was considered a breakthrough moment, where her series of works depicting swimmers received frenzied responses. Following this, Bradford presented her first exhibition at the blue-chip gallery Sperone Westwater earlier this year, which consisted of six new large-scale canvases that were thoughtfully curated in one room, emphasising the hazy ambience of each work.

Glass spoke with the artist shortly before the opening at Sperone Westwater.

Katherine Bradford at her studio in Brooklyn, New York, February, 2017. Photograph by Hatnim Lee

The artist at work. Photograph by Hatnim Lee

Where do you start in terms of thinking about the scene that will be depicted in the painting? Do you come to the canvas with an idea to paint the moon, for example?

No, I don't work like that. I don't paint from ideas. What happens is that I am putting the paint onto the canvas and slowly and gradually it evolves. I will quite freely put paint down as a ground on the canvas. And then, little by little, the scene, as you call it, emerges.

What has attracted you to the motifs that you have chosen to examine in your work over the years?

I think that I'm attracted to the sky, the ocean, and outer space, because you can tip it in all of those directions pretty easily. You can slide from the ocean right into outer space. There aren't divisions.

So would you say that there is a malleability to your landscapes?

Yes, there's the word! Malleability. I also like to think of these particular things as very forgiving – water and sky are forgiving things to paint. You can almost do anything with them. Which is why, for instance, I don't paint rooms, or perspective or shadows.

What do you think is appealing to you about these environments? Do they make you feel a certain way?

I really like their mystery. And I also like how peaceful they are. I think of paintings as very silent, when they're on the wall. They are quiet. Perhaps these environments I show underscore that. Also, I am a very economical painter. I'm making everything with just a few strokes, in a way. How about using the word 'mystery' as well – I think that's a good word. My paintings could be seen as mysterious in the sense of there not being a clear narrative; we can think about the scenes in any kind of way.

Also because of the landscapes that you pick out, which are intrinsically mysterious…

And I make the people in my paintings fairly small too, which adds to that. In one of the new works, I struggled with it for so long that I lost control of the sky one day, so I ended up with something that was about layering and light. The end painting is really about showing the steps I went through with those colours and layers to get the sky to look like that.

Can you tell me about your reference to swimmers? This comes up a lot in your painting.

Really what I love is transparency and cropping, and that's a good reason to do swimmers. People want me to say that swimming is a metaphor or that I was on the swimming team. But I am speaking as someone who is a painter – I make paintings. So my main motivation is to create a transparent look in a painting; that has always been fun for me. In terms of the cropping, I love to create an image where the water and the body are interacting. So what I'm trying to do is to get the human body to be enfolded in the paint, and therefore in the water.

Are you trying to present an environment that is bigger than a human? Your paintings always give the impression that a human is amazed by what they are looking at, or that they are sacrificing some part of themselves to the landscape they are in.

I really don't think that I have to try to do that. I think that is the state of our lives. Nature is bigger than us. But you are right, I am definitely interested in this situation otherwise I would just do portraits or people sitting in rooms. When I started painting I was living in Maine, which is such a rich place for the history of modern American art. I'm thinking of artists such as Winslow Homer, John Manning, Marsden Hartley. I think that I was very influenced, not so much by looking at the ocean, but by the great paintings that came out of that area; by the representations of these things. The rocks and the crashing waves and the little boats – I was so eager to join in that conversation. I really like the language of painting and what it can do. And so what drew me into this world, I think, is to see if I could make some paintings about the same subject, but make them look 21st century.

Bradford's studio. Photograph by Hatnim Lee

Is it true that you hadn't painted prior to moving to Maine, as a young adult? I understand that you grew up in an artistic household but you weren't making art.

I didn't do any art-making when I was growing up. My mother was a very visual person, but I don't think that she even realised it. And I think she'd be very surprised that I was sitting here right now, talking about my paintings. It wasn't something that I was supposed to do. I remember that I once told her that I thought she'd make a good artist and she wasn't impressed at all. She didn't have a high regard for artists. She was very against me being an artist – a serious artist, at least.

How did you start to paint after you moved to Maine?

I made friends with painters and poets – there was a community there. And I saw what they did and how they lived, and their priorities. I liked it. So I started making paintings. I simply took the brush, dipped it into the paint and put it on the canvas. I had had no schooling at all at that point.

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It was a little primitive. I was making objects that might fit into the beautiful seacoast. I didn't start representational painting until I felt at home with the material of paint. And, I think, that's not a bad way to begin. But that's not how they teach you at art school, unfortunately. At college, you first learn how to draw from observation – you get your skills down. But I learnt the other way. I played with paint and was very experimental. And when I started to put figures into my work, some of my painter friends were very against that because it was too old-fashioned, too academic. It wasn't forward-looking.

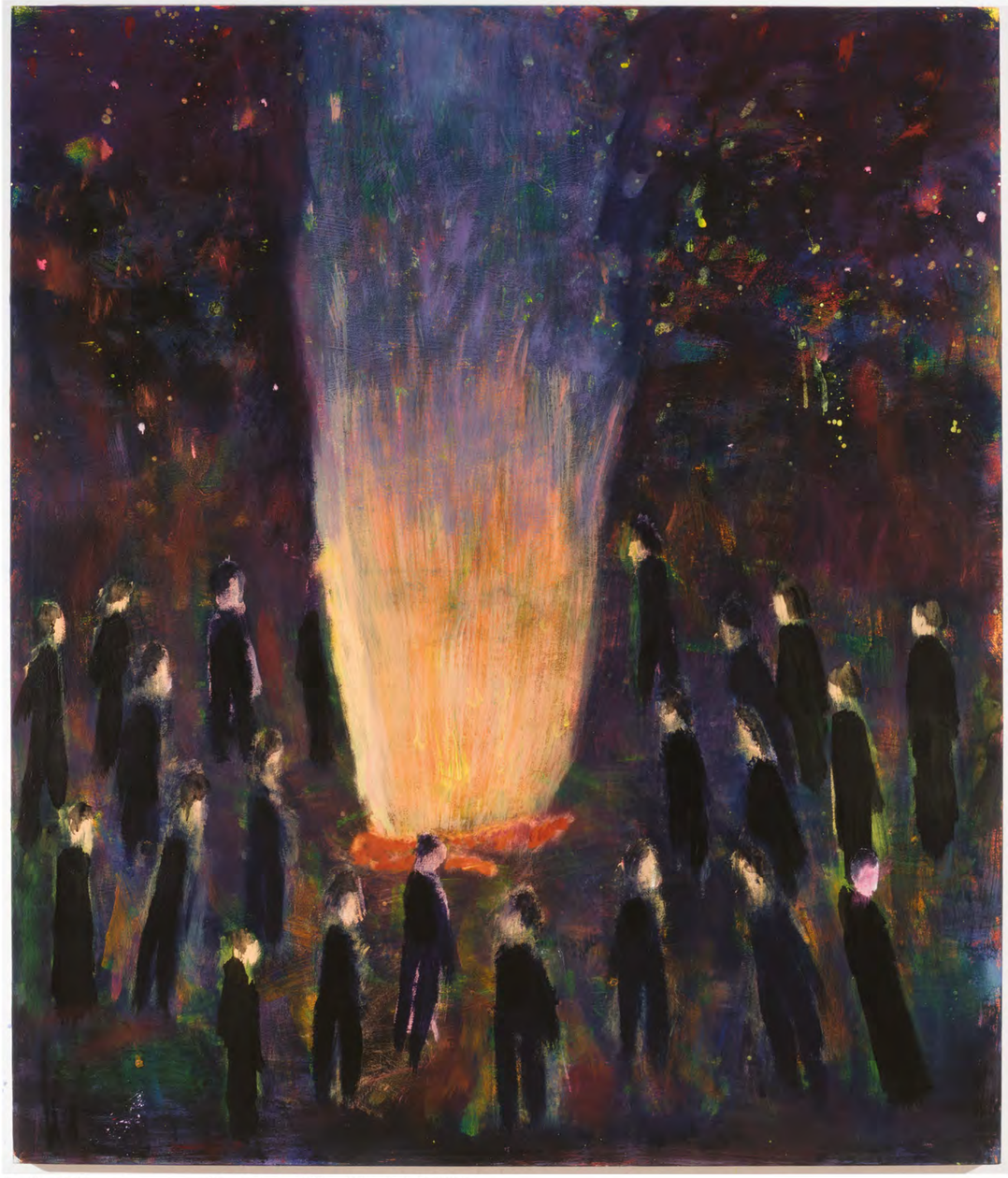
Have you always approached the figure in the way that you are doing so right now? A person for you, I think, is about making a mark. It isn't about representation.

Yes, that's well put. In fact, I realised at that time that some of my marks looked like figures. And so I thought that I'd better take out those marks, because of the negative attitude towards the figure in painting. But then I realised that some of the artists that I really admired – A. R. Penck, Carroll Dunham and Donald Baechler – they were making figures as painters who were working in quite an abstract way. They were putting shapes together. And I wanted to find a way to put people in my paintings and still remain the mark-maker that I was. It took me a long time to do that.

It sounds as though having a community of artists around you has been important to your life and career.

Yes. And perhaps that's why my work went into the direction of the poetic. There were a lot of poets in that group around me in Maine. I'm teaching at Yale now, which is such a stretch for me because it's so brainy. When a student seems stuck, the university suggests a course that the student take – a philosophy course or something similar to work through their problem. They really believe in that method. Whereas I feel that what painters or artists need is to be around other artists. Artists need to talk to each other and listen to each other speak about their work. It's about that feedback.

Shell Seeker, Large Night, 2016, acrylic on canvas, 55 × 72 inches (140 × 183 cm), SW 16206



Bonfire, 2016, acrylic on canvas, 80 × 68 inches (203 × 173 cm), SW 16207

> Sometimes the challenge is also to *leave things* in the painting – to *not correct* it.

Geyser Gowns, 2016, acrylic on canvas, 60 × 48 inches (152,5 × 122 cm), SW 16211

And you have very much relied on these critiques of your own work from artist friends.

You know, sometimes the challenge is also to leave things in the painting – to not correct it. I feel so fortunate to have had friends who didn't say, "I think you should fix that."

How do you feel about this recent interest in your work? It seems to have skyrocketed since your show at Canada in January 2016.

Well, I was a nobody. But I guess it depends what "nobody" is (Laughs).

> Put more *emotion* into your painting. In the art world I don't hear people saying that.

When were you a nobody? When you were in Maine?

(Laughs) It would depend on who you ask there! No, I had a wonderful time. I never thought that I was a complete loser (laughs). But it has taken me a long time. Sperone Westwater is a hot shot gallery and it's very surprising. I love telling people that I'm showing at Canada, and at Sperone Westwater. And they say, "You deserve it! Good for you!"

What was your ambition when you first started thinking of yourself as an artist?

I think that I wanted to survive. I had to be in the closet about how much I loved painting because I had two kids to bring up. Both families – both sets of grandparents – were very suspicious that I might, God forbid, become an artist. I had already failed at marriage, so I was divorced, and raising kids. So I had to keep a reign on how much time I could spend in the studio on my work. I didn't have a solo show in New York until my kids started college! I'm sure that is a discouraging thing for any young artist to hear, but that's what happened. Did you read the story that my son wrote? He is a writer, and he wrote a story about what it was like growing up with me, and his feeling of attending the opening of my exhibition at Canada, and realising that all of those struggling years were actually worth something. What he had always seen throughout his life was that I had always cared about my paintings. But that night, at the opening, he saw that other people also cared about my paintings. That story moved a lot of people because it was very personal. It got to people.

And ultimately your work is very emotional.

Yes. Put more emotion into your painting. In the art world I don't hear people saying that.

– By Allie Biswas

Storm at Sea, 2016, acrylic on canvas, 80 × 68 inches (203 × 173 cm), SW 16209

Moon Jumper, 2016, acrylic on canvas, 72 × 60 inches (183 × 152,5 cm), SW 16210