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Katherine Bradford Is Just Getting Started

“I don’t think anybody believed I could be an artist,” the 82-year-old painter told *Hyperallergic* in an interview.



Hakim Bishara June 5, 2024



Artist Katherine Bradford at her studio in Brooklyn, New York (all photos Hakim Bishara/*Hyperallergic*)

This article is part of *Hyperallergic*’s [2024 Pride Month](#) series, featuring interviews with art-world queer and trans elders throughout June.

At her studio in Brooklyn, New York, 82-year-old artist Katherine Bradford and I sat across from a finished painting titled “Women Together.” It depicts two silver-haired women with featureless faces levitating over a bed, united in an embrace.

“They’re levitating because they’re happy together,” the artist explained.

Wearing her octogenarian years so gracefully, Bradford lives happily with her partner of 34 years, Jane O’Wyatt. In recent years, she finally began enjoying the fruits of her decades-long career, showing at major museums and international art galleries, while leagues of young queer artists look up to her as a role model.

“I’m living the dream,” she told me, adding that she’s just getting started.



Katherine Bradford, "Women Together" (2024)

It took many years for that dream to come true: She turned to painting in her 30s, after leaving Maine, where she shared a house with her twin daughters and now ex-husband Peter Bradford, to start a new life as an artist in New York City. She continued dating men for about another decade before ultimately meeting O'Wyatt in 1990. It took much longer to fit into New York City's cliquey art scene, to which she was — and perhaps remains — an outsider with her candid, down-to-earth attitude and unorthodox style of painting.

Surrounded by her work, and with a photo of her and O'Wyatt on their wedding day resting on a coffee table between us, I asked Bradford a few questions. The following is a condensed version of our conversation.

Hyperallergic: *At what point did you gain the freedom to be your true self?*

Katherine Bradford: Hard question [...] It wasn't sudden. I had to do it gradually.

My parents were very upset that I didn't stay married to Peter. Our families knew each other and he was just the person that I was supposed to marry. We had these twins right away and I think it was upsetting to the people around me that I ... I messed up, kind of.

H: *Did you have to pay a heavy price for that?*

KB: It was a combination of feeling really bad that I had disappointed them — including my children, who were also pretty upset, although they have a good sense of humor and have written some funny things about that time — but I was also excited by what was happening. Moving to New York was not easy, but it was certainly interesting, and I gradually found a place for myself here.

H: *Those two things, coming out and becoming an artist, seem intertwined.*

KB: Yes, and you know, it was harder for me to become an artist than to come out.

H: *Was it because of the male-dominated art world?*

KB: People's opinions were harder on me. I don't think anybody believed I could be an artist. They didn't take me seriously.

H: *How did that make you feel? Did it fill you with self-doubt?*

KB: It's not that I wanted to be a great artist. I just wanted to lead the artist life. I just wanted a chance.

H: *And here you are now, in your prime.*

KB: Oh, my prime is 10 years away!

I think one thing that kept me from being an artist was that I had a very happy childhood. I wasn't even a miserable wife. It's just that I thought there was something more to life.

I knew that the life I was living wasn't all there was. I was curious to see what else could happen. And I'm still curious. That's why I don't think I've reached my prime yet.

H: *There's a lot of freedom in your work: women flying, dancing, swimming, levitating...*



Jane O'Wyatt and Katherine Bradford married soon after same-sex marriage became legal in New York State in 2011. O'Wyatt is holding the marriage certificate in the couple's photo on their wedding day.

KB: I think gay male artists have done a very good job of giving us representations of gay male life, especially the erotic life. I'm trying to balance that out, but I don't really know how to do that. These two women [pointing at "Women Together"] are elders, and they're sort of gentle with each other. I wanted to tell that story. And here [pointing at another painting in progress] is a family with two mothers.

H: *What feeling do you go home with after working on these paintings?*

KB: An impish grin!

H: *Younger artists look up to you, and I've heard several stories about how accessible and supportive you are. Is it important to you to support younger queer artists and be part of the community?*

KB: It's important to me to be an open, decent person in this community. I don't care if they're younger or older, queer or straight.

When I moved here from Maine, people were so mean to me that I didn't ever want to repeat that. I thought the hierarchy in the art world was terrible. And I still don't like it at all.



Hakim Bishara

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