

ART | NOVEMBER 2025 | IN CONVERSATION

KATHERINE BRADFORD with Katy Hessel

The first time I came across the American artist Katherine Bradford (b. 1942) was during the pandemic. I remember being spellbound by her paintings of luminous waters, cosmic skies, or supermen flying high. They offered me freedom at a time of being trapped, and—through the power of Bradford’s imagination—were a conduit to hope. Full of humans interacting with each other, they were a reminder of the importance of togetherness.

Later, seeing them in person was like witnessing an orb glow—as if her paintings were lit by a blanket of stars, or a light, like fire, from within (she has often talked about being inspired by the hearth in Maine). I can’t overstate their wonder and enchantment, and I still turn to them when I want to be reminded of the magic of painting, or of people.



Portrait of Katherine Bradford, pencil on paper by Phong H. Bui.

Katy Hessel (Rail): Is this where you spend all summer?

Katherine Bradford: Yes, I used to live here (Maine) year round, and then I got myself to New York City. Visually, my work is quite inspired by this place, which is right on the coast. So all my water images, and swimming, and country—I’m taking a lot from what I see here.

Rail: I always remember you telling me about the light. Not just the light *in* Maine, but the light on the hearth and the lit fire—that being the light that you were interested in.

Bradford: People talk a lot about the light in Maine. You know, I really enjoyed your interview with Lois Dodd. I got to know her in Maine, and I particularly appreciated that you highlighted certain aspects of her work—the clothesline paintings, the burning house. I think they’re some of her best work.

Rail: Thank you! Yes. I was lucky to drive down and visit her in New Jersey. Seeing where she made her work was incredible. I mean, you could say that about every artist, but for Dodd, it’s like you’re driving into a Dodd painting.

Bradford: You could see spring everywhere, which she certainly puts in her paintings.



Katherine Bradford, *Communal Table*, 2025. Acrylic on canvas, 72 × 68 inches. Courtesy the artist and CANADA.

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Rail: She certainly does. Alright, should we get going?

Bradford: Yes.

Rail: Katherine Bradford. You were born in 1942 in New York, and raised in Connecticut. Tell me about what brought you to art.

Bradford: I was brought to art rather late, although looking back, I think I was more surrounded by a promising future than I thought, because my mother was the daughter of a prominent architect. She was a very visual person, and she talked to her children about what she was looking at constantly. She liked to take us to museums, and had a deep feeling for art. She loved Matisse. She wanted to have Matisse postcards around her when she washed the dishes. But she didn't imagine that her daughter would want to be an artist, and was very against that.

Rail: Do you think you have to be *born* an artist, or do you think someone can *become* an artist?

Bradford: I think I demanded of life that it give me a chance. I remember the first time I gave a lecture. I substituted for someone who was sick, so I felt I had to prove myself, and I said to the guy who invited me, “I just want a chance. Give me a chance, I can do this.” That was very early on.

Rail: When was that?

Bradford: Probably in the eighties, when my chances were fewer.

Rail: What did giving that lecture do for you?

Bradford: It was fun talking to students who wrote down everything you said, and seemed willing to learn and listen to you. I realized that I liked talking about art. I could talk about art, and it would always be a lively conversation.

Rail: Do you remember what you said?

Bradford: I think I talked a little bit about not believing I really was an artist. You know, you don’t get a degree or a title. In those early years, some person in an official position said to me, “Well, *are* you an artist?” It was really embarrassing, because I felt I was somewhat of an imposter for a long time.

Rail: Why do you think that was?

Bradford: Because I had such a strong identity as being a wife and mother, and I had to shed that.

Rail: I think that’s interesting in terms of identity, and people feeling like they’re stifled in certain identities, and not knowing that they can be anything. I think that’s what your work gives people—this incredible sense of freedom and expansiveness. When I look at it, I see so many different things, but really I see possibility. You’re the artist, you can’t help what you create. But on the receiving end, it’s really quite magic.

Bradford: It’s not something I set out to do, but if you’re feeling that, I think it’s wonderful.

Rail: There’s such a sense of hope with your work. It takes me out of the dark reality of the world.

Bradford: Can you give me an example?

Rail: Your painting *Camping Trip*, from 2016.

Bradford: It was a painting I did, well, ten years ago, and I newly saw it when you posted about our conversation for the *Great Women Artists* podcast on Instagram and used that painting as a lead in. I thought I had created a place with a lot of elements that I cherish, like the night sky and the people swimming and a little shelter of a tent. Frankly, when I looked at that painting, I said to myself, “Oh, I wish I could do this again.”

Rail: The power of art, for me, is that a spirit exists inside it. But there are certain artworks that just *work*. You can go to an exhibition by the best painter in the world and some of the works will hit and others won’t. And when they hit, it’s like magic, like they happen all at once.

Bradford: Well, I’ve noticed that many artists are known for just a few paintings, like Edvard Munch. Munch is a terrific artist, but people are going to think of *The Scream* (1893), which he did a lot of variations of. He did a lot of other very good paintings, but people don’t know about those.

Rail: There was a fantastic exhibition of Edvard Munch at the National Portrait Gallery in London recently, and there’s a work of someone called Eva Mudocci. It’s called *The Brooch* (1903). And for me, that’s the Munch painting that has the spark. I find it just breathtakingly beautiful.

Bradford: Well, I hope you continue to broadcast that.

Rail: Let's go back to your beginnings. I'm interested in your mother, who was also inspired by her father. Tell us about him: he was an architect. I think it feels quite magic to be an architect, the fact that someone could physically design a building that someone could live in.

Bradford: I don't think she identified with him. I don't think she felt that he had passed his talents on to her. I think she felt her role was very much to get married and have children. She was a very brilliant mind, but she never thought of herself as a professional. In fact, I told her once, after I'd seen how she'd set the table, I said, "You know, Mom, I think you would make a very good artist." And she kind of got mad at me, and said, "Oh no, that's not for me. I like people." So she saw an artist as an isolated, odd character, and she felt that she was very socially involved.

Rail: But she was creative?

Bradford: I think she was. I hear a lot of people talk about their mothers in a way that there is a lot of missed opportunity, back a couple of generations. And I think that's very true, and many of the artists I know had mothers who were artists, but weren't really able to develop very far as artists. It takes leaning into it with your whole self, and time, I think. Do you agree with that?

Rail: Yes. But now there are so many more "accepted" ways of being an artist, you know? Like being an artist and mother. However, it's not that they didn't exist in history—they always have—but for some reason art history has so often prioritised a mythological idea of what an "artist" is—like your mother's interpretation that you had to be isolated. When actually, it can be many different things.

Bradford: I think today there's a healthier community of artists. If you read about Paris as the center of art in the twenties, it was quite a collection of outcasts.

Rail: When did you first go to Paris?

Bradford: In my junior year of college I spent a year in Paris, which was a great gift. It was more than an education, because I experienced a very old city with a great history, especially in the visual arts. I really loved it.

Rail: Do you remember what you saw?

Bradford: I took a course that was actually held in the Louvre, and was taught by a French professor standing there next to the paintings, speaking French to us. I remember, at one point, he was standing next to a painting by Paul Gauguin, and he said the colors were in very bad taste. I knew that he was wrong: the colors were fabulous. I think it was the first time in my student life that I had an idea that was my own. It was a revelation to me that I could question a professor.

Rail: I think that's why art education is so important, because it gives you that questioning and the agency to ask something that is other from what you're told.

Bradford: Yes, that's a terrific moment, isn't it? I thought I was right! Which was pretty unusual, because I'd been used to just absorbing what my elders had told me. But this, I was not going to swallow.

Rail: You knew you were right. Were you at college studying art, or were you studying something else?

Bradford: No, I went to Bryn Mawr College and it did not have a studio art program. It's an all-women's college, founded by Quakers, and they have since set up a studio art program. But when I was there, which was in the sixties, it wasn't considered scholarly enough. They had a very excellent history of art program, however.

Rail: What did studying that give you?

Bradford: There was a lot of it that I dismissed. I didn't think going back into ancient ruins and so on was that interesting. I thought ancient ruins were really ugly, and I yearned to get—

Rail: Why?

Bradford: There's no color. I yearned to get past the Impressionists into the artists that I really loved.



Katherine Bradford, *The Gifting Bowl*, 2025. Acrylic on canvas, 60 × 72 inches. Courtesy the artist and CANADA.

Rail: Who are they?

Bradford: Philip Guston, Marsden Hartley, Henri Matisse, Pablo Picasso, and the artist who was at the Louvre who the professor said had bad taste in color. It was Gauguin. Gauguin!

Rail: Oh, really? Wow! Why?

Bradford: Because the teacher was a stuffy old conservative guy. He couldn't take what Gauguin was putting forth. I guess there was a period when Gauguin was considered pretty risqué, doing naked young women from another culture. I think he's pretty accepted into the canon, don't you think?

Rail: I think he's still considered risqué.

Bradford: What are they questioning now? That he took advantage of women?

Rail: Yes, but I think people are questioning his work in a different way now than they used to.

Bradford: And Picasso also. I hear him criticized quite a lot for the way he lived his life. How do you feel about that?

Rail: I feel that... the way that history has idolized certain aspects of people, and dismissed others, I find that uncomfortable.

Bradford: Give me an example.

Rail: I guess you think of the whole of the history of art, right? In the sense that so many of these stories are about conquering people, and conquering especially the innocent, or the woman, or... I think that history forgets to look at the other perspective, and it concentrates on the kind of person who is creating the violence, if that makes sense. Why do we always look at something from that perspective? Why can't we look at something from the perspective of, let's say, the women Picasso painted? Like Dora Maar, who's incredible, but how many people know her as an artist, rather than knowing her as Picasso's muse? Or Françoise Gilot, who continues to be defined by her relationship with Picasso

in her twenties? I find it troubling that we just fall into these traps of... Look, these are great artists, but there are also other perspectives as well. I think “Picasso” means more than just Picasso the person. It’s almost like this word—to describe someone as “the Picasso,” “the maestro,” or something. Why have we used that as a default term? Anyway, I’ve probably just gone off on a tangent here, which—

Bradford: Yes, but I noticed in your book, *The Story of Art Without Men*, you talked about Dora Maar, and I think Françoise Gilot, and you did not mention Picasso. I think I just laughed out loud when I saw that. I thought, “This is very radical.”

Rail: But you don’t have to, that’s the thing!

Bradford: No, you don’t! You didn’t.

Rail: I think people underestimate how smart people are, you know? I think that we don’t have to contextualize people by saying who their male counterpart is. We can contextualize them in different ways. Because also, we have to remember that some people are going to be new to these people.

Bradford: And I noticed that you talked about Frida Kahlo and did not mention Diego Rivera.

Rail: I mean, honestly, most of the time, these aren’t even sort of conscious decisions. It’s more like just saying, “Well, let’s just talk about them quite frankly.” You know?

Bradford: It was a great stroke. It was just a great erasure. Congratulations.

Rail: *[Laughs]* Well, congratulations to you. Let’s get back to your interview, Kathy! You’ve got your show coming up at CANADA gallery. Family feels like a thread between the paintings. People seem to be more “present” and identifiable, especially, for example, *Grandmother* (2025).



Katherine Bradford, *Grandmother*, 2025. Acrylic on canvas, 72 × 68 inches. Courtesy the artist.

Bradford: You know, it was Antonia Showering who influenced me. When I heard her talk about her work, she mentioned her grandmother quite a lot—that there was more than one painting in her show at Timothy Taylor in New York that was a tribute to her grandmother, who had recently died. This made me feel very good as a grandmother. She was raising her up very high, emotionally. As I was painting *Grandmother*, I realized that it was a group of people, and one of them was in the center. She was smaller than all the others, and around her could possibly be her two children and the four grandchildren. I hadn't deliberately done that, and I don't know why I made her naked, but by the time I finished the painting, I realized it could be an older, white-haired woman surrounded by her children and grandchildren. It's the first time I've done something like that. The way I build my paintings is to decide after they're done what they're about.

Rail: It's interesting that the grandmother is identifiably naked. Why is the grandmother naked?

Bradford: I have no reason to give for that.

Rail: It's this sort of exposure and vulnerability, I guess. There's also this amazing element of protection in that work. How do you explore vulnerability?

Bradford: Well, the reason I really like to put my characters in bathing suits is because I feel that when you're in a bathing suit, you're very vulnerable. You're exposed. Some people aren't. Some people rise very high and look fabulous, but most people don't. Emotionally, I think being exposed and vulnerable and awkward is something that I really like to paint about. I think it's a very profound human condition, and quite the opposite of what the early portraits were about. The early portraits were to give the sitter a lot of power. But this isn't what I'm interested in.

Rail: I think it's interesting, this idea of grandmother and vulnerability. Because when I think of "grandmother," I often think: "wisdom."

Bradford: You do? Try being a grandmother with four teenage grandchildren. I don't think they're thinking about wisdom.

Rail: *[Laughs]* But how did it feel when Antonia was talking about her grandmother?

Bradford: She's a young, beautiful woman who obviously adored her grandmother, and wanted to talk about that in her paintings. I was very pleased at the way she put her priorities. It's pretty unusual, you know.

Rail: To talk about grandmothers?

Bradford: Well, I don't see the young women figurative painters talking about their grandmothers.

Rail: It's a good point, but I reckon if you ask them, everyone would be able to say a lot.

Bradford: Who's asking them? No one.

Rail: Which is why I thought it was so interesting that you made the grandmother a subject in your work, because never do we see that in art history either. Where is the grandmother in art history?

Bradford: Aha, that's quite an interesting essay for you. She's invisible. There's a terrific Alice Neel painting of herself sitting naked in a chair, that I think really endeared people to her and her whole point of view in portraiture—that she could do that to herself. "Here I am." Don't you think that's a standout painting?

Rail: Totally, because it gives precedence and visibility to someone who was never really given that precedence and visibility.

Bradford: People love that painting, and it's showing a person with an aged body. That's unusual.



Katherine Bradford, *Moonlight*, 2025. Acrylic on canvas, 60 × 72 inches. Courtesy the artist.

Rail: At CANADA, there's also *Moonlight* (2025). That also feels like a grandmother and a grandchild.

Bradford: Oh, thank you. I can't figure out that painting.

Rail: Why?

Bradford: Because I really don't know why I made the two characters in it so different. One is very fleshed out and described, which is pretty unusual for me to do that. She has a face, and—as you said—she's rather distinct as a person. And then I felt the need to put another person in that painting, but I just couldn't bring myself to make any more detail than I did. So the other person is merely a cipher—very abbreviated. But there's some kind of mood in that painting, so I called it *Moonlight*.

Rail: The way I see it is that the moon on the left-hand side is brighter, and that points to the figure who is more detailed—as if shining on them—whereas the figure who is on the right—and is not as detailed— belongs to the other side of the moon, where it's not in sight. I like this idea that you can only really see some of the moon. You can't always see the whole thing. But also with that blue figure, it almost feels like a stand-in for me. It's as though I become that person, and I'm looking out onto the elderly woman.

Bradford: That is so beautiful, Katy.

Rail: Really?

Bradford: Yes. You know, you have an amazing talent for being able to talk about art.



Katherine Bradford, *Quiet Procession*, 2025. Acrylic on canvas, 68 × 72 inches. Courtesy the artist.

Rail: I don't know. But I love the mystery of your paintings. Let's think about *Quiet Procession* (2025). Communion and community seems to be at the centre of all these works. Why do you think you've focused on this?

Bradford: It wasn't deliberate, because I don't paint that way. I start the painting and I'm in the moment. One mark leads to another. Everything you say is very true, and I appreciate hearing words about what I painted, but while I'm making the painting, I'm not involved at all in what it's going to mean. I'm making visual decisions. If I put one person in a painting, I feel the need to put another person, and then I want to know how they're connected. So, often, I make one person touching another person, and then I put a person beside them. And is that a person an onlooker, an outsider, a relative? These questions come up after I conclude the painting. I was mystified by the *Moonlight* painting, but I think your very poetic interpretation of that painting is fantastic—that the moon has two sides, a very light one and a dark one. You know, it never occurred to me.

Rail: What have you titled this exhibition?

Bradford: I haven't. You said there's a thread running through it, but I can't find the thread.

Rail: The first work I saw of the show was *Communal Table* (2025). I think it sums up the exhibition. What I love about your work is this joy of being connected. But sometimes your figures seem to be running away. I think of *Runaway Wife Shelters Her House* (2022)—

Bradford: Yes, escape.

Rail: I guess your paintings from ten years ago, for me, feel like they were in a sort of cosmological world. Now they feel like they've been brought back to Earth. We're not looking at them from the telescopic point-of-view. We're looking at them as people, on the same plane as us.

Bradford: Yes, I think that's true. I think, as my confidence grew, I made the figures in my work bigger. They took up more room. So you're right: when I began painting, the people were rather tiny. They were small people in a big universe.

Rail: And now they're big people in a small universe.

Bradford: Is that what I'm doing now? The father of my children was extremely tall, so my children are extremely tall, and my grandchildren are all about six feet tall. Their nickname for me is "Big Kath."

Rail: Why?

Bradford: It's sort of acknowledging that I'm not as big as them, but that it's okay.



Katherine Bradford, *While Father Sleeps*, 2025. Acrylic on canvas, diptych: 72 × 120 inches. Courtesy the artist.

Rail: I love that. I was intrigued by *While Father Sleeps* (2025), considering your beginnings. In your twenties, you had two children. As you said, you had a husband, but left the marriage and came to New York with your two children

Bradford: You know, I'm feeling that I'm with a tarot card reader who's very skilled, because you're finding a lot in these paintings that I hadn't seen myself—the fact that there is a figure lying at the bottom of the painting was a compositional decision I made. I needed something to bridge—this is a diptych, so I took two paintings side by side, and I wanted something to bridge the painting. So I put a figure lying down, then I painted the other figures around the lying down figure. The lying down figure looked like a big guy, and the other figures seemed to be in attendance to someone who was doing nothing—who was lying there. So it seemed to me that everyone was waiting for this guy to wake up, and this either meant they were in limbo, or they were more free, or they were captured by having to wait. I thought that was good, all these different ways it could be interpreted.

Rail: What was that like, coming to New York in the—?.

Bradford: 1980s. It was exactly as you wrote about in *The Story of Art Without Men*. There was one conversation, and it was being led by men—interesting men like Julian Schnabel, who was captivating everybody with his broken plates. In the painting world, I thought there were a great bunch of women. I insisted that those were the ones I was paying attention to, but that wasn't necessarily who was having the big shows.

Rail: Who were they?

Bradford: Joan Snyder, Elizabeth Murray, Louise Fishman, Dona Nelson, Susan Rothenberg.

Rail: Who are those—

Bradford: You have this wonderful smile on your face about this story.

Rail: I do! Because I love the idea of the sort of beginning of something, and what Brooklyn must have been like. Who was part of it? What was happening?

Bradford: We were struggling artists, and they didn't seem to care if I were female or if I were older. I was accepted. One of those people was Phong Bui, who started the *Brooklyn Rail*. He was part of that group. I can remember him saying, "I want to start a newspaper." We were walking down the sidewalk, and we all said, "Oh, that's crazy. Don't do that." But he did. He persevered. And you can imagine that he felt somewhat of an outsider, being a person who came over as a very young man from Vietnam. I think what we all had in common is we all wanted to belong.

Rail: Did you feel like you belonged with them?

Bradford: Yes... You know, I wonder who feels in the art world that they securely belong. I just wonder as it's such a mercurial—it's such a fickle community, about what's in and what's out.

Rail: It is. But I think we all belong with the art.

Bradford: So there's always that connection, there's the art, and then your connection to it. I would always tell my students, "Okay, we're looking at this piece of art. What do you make of it?" And no one would say anything, because they were unsure of themselves. And I'd say, "Look, if you can talk about art, you'll get paid for it. I'm serious. And so start now. Just say something and form some opinions."

Rail: Tell me about those early days with your friends, and the artists. What were people discussing?

Bradford: They were talking about the fact that painting was dead, it was old-fashioned, and that you had to contribute something fresh and new, like a shaped canvas, or painting with glitter, or using broken plates on your painting. Eric Fischl was painting on many different panels. Every show, you had to bring something that hadn't been done before, and to use—as I did—a brush and paint on the canvas was out. That had been done for centuries, so don't go there.

Rail: So were you trying to make something new?

Bradford: I never bought into that idea of using material other than paint, or using a tool that wasn't a brush. As you know, people were staining, dropping, and throwing paint. And I just loved touch. I still do. I love the feeling of a human hand making a mark, and I haven't left that.

Rail: What were you making in the 1980s?

Bradford: Well, as far as I can tell, I would make something, and all these pals of mine would come over, and they'd tell me what they liked and what they didn't like. Often it was the awkward, mysterious pieces that you couldn't figure out right away that interested people. I had to learn not to be so insistent on a theme or a subject. I had to learn to let it be. In other words, I had to leave my rational mind behind, and that was foreign to me, because I'd had a rather rigorous education based on facts. The fact that I would approach making something and not know what I was doing was kind of heady, but it was uncomfortable and not what I was used to.

Rail: I love that idea that you have to "leave the rational behind," because isn't that what it's all about? You have to go against the rational in order to carve out something new. That's how we all find our artistic languages. In whatever art form, we have to break from the rational, because if you're just doing something from that point of view, you're just following along with something.

Bradford: You're absolutely right. I believe in that, and the artists that I admire the most are not rational. They're not intellectual thinkers. I think that's pretty rare in the art world. It's not a scholarly realm at all.

Rail: Who are they?

Bradford: I admire Josh Smith. He's very unusual, and if you listen to him speak, he doesn't even try to make sense.

In doing that, I think he speaks a lot of truth. I'm very interested in poetry. And poetry is often words put together that conjure up a feeling or a mood, but it's not descriptive, really. It's poetic.

Rail: What's your favorite poem?

Bradford: My favorite poems are Frank O'Hara's *Lunch Poems*. They're very everyday. Do you know Frank O'Hara?

Rail: Of course. I came to know Frank O'Hara through Eileen Myles. I interviewed Myles for my podcast on Joan Mitchell. I also knew him because he was painted by Alice Neel, and then learnt he curated Helen Frankenthaler's show in 1960 at the Jewish Museum. And of course, he was friends with Mitchell.

Bradford: Oh, yes. Yes, he was very much a part of the art world.

Rail: I love making friends with poets through artists. Although it's not Frank O'Hara, I love Joan Mitchell's pastels of poems by James Schuyler.

Bradford: Oh, James Schuyler is fabulous. Yes. And they're referred to as the New York School poets. And Eileen Myles is a friend of mine. They're quite fascinating, yes.

Rail: No way! I love them! When I interviewed Eileen, they wrote a poem about getting ready for doing the podcast, called "Diet Coke," inspired by "Having a Coke with You."

Bradford: I think one of Eileen Myles's greatest poems is "An American Poem." It's about people thinking they're a Kennedy, because they have a Boston accent. They riff on it. It's a marvelous poem. So great.

Rail: How does poetry infiltrate your work?

Bradford: I found the courage to make paintings that weren't descriptive, weren't rational, weren't totally clear. The viewer had to put together what I was doing, and come up with lots of different interpretations, which I thought was great. So that's very far away from a lot of the political work that was being made.

Rail: When did you feel like you belonged?

Bradford: You know, when I go to an art opening now—now that I'm in my eighties—instead of looking around the room and saying, "Oh, I want to speak to this person, I want to speak to that person," I just stand in one place, and people come up to me and say, "Oh, I heard you talk at my college twenty years ago," or something like that.