

The Nocturnal Worlds of Katherine Bradford

by John Yau Jan 22, 2017

In a review of her last show, *[Fear of Waves](#)*, which was her debut at CANADA (January 9–February 14, 2016) almost exactly a year ago, I wrote:

Bradford has transformed the whimsical into the catastrophic, its polar opposite, without losing her offhand humor.

In this exhibition, it struck me that what Bradford keeps getting better at is incoherence: she can meld divergent details without coming across as contrived or arbitrary. As a result, her best paintings possess an awful if inexplicable logic. It is the unfathomable that holds our attention, makes us look again. The thing that Bradford understands in a deep and profound way is that you cannot be programmatic in your search for the incomprehensible. In fact, I am not so sure you can even approach it. Instead, you have to be open to it — you have to let the inexplicable present itself, and then be ready to seize that moment. This is what Bradford is able to do.

Bradford paints in acrylic, using thin coats. She is not afraid to paint over whatever she has on her canvas in order to get somewhere else. She might also apply a final, semi-transparent layer, changing the meaning of the entire scene. All eight paintings are dark, with many having deep blue, nearly black grounds. The sun has set on this world and shows no signs of returning. People are swimming in the dark.



Katherine Bradford, "Moon Jumper" (2016), acrylic on canvas, 72 x 60 inches (all photographs by Jason Mandella, courtesy the artist and CANADA, New York)

In "Moon Jumper" (2016) a figure seems about to leap free of three wide, brushy bands in different hues of violet stacked on top of each other. A full moon floats above and to the left of the long-legged, featureless figure, who is holding what could be a wand or a giant pencil. Again, Bradford adds nothing to explain the painting, or even tries to give it a context. We feel as unmoored as the jumper.



Katherine Bradford, "Geyser Gowns" (2016), acrylic on canvas, 60 x 48 inches

In “Geyser Gowns” (2016), three women have been lifted into the air on whitish-blue, scumbled forms that swell like hoop skirts or crinoline. Two of the women have been raised to about the same height, which seems slightly higher than they would be if they were standing in their bare feet, but the third woman towers over the other two. She is cropped by the right side of the canvas, suggesting an incompleteness that adds more mystery to this scene. In this pared down setting of dark blue water and darker blue sky populated by a smattering of stars, Bradford offers neither explanation, nor anything else as a key to the painting. Adding to this mystery is the orange band running along the top and bottom edge, and the bit of green rising from the bottom along the right side. This is all that is left of the composition that preceded this one, which Bradford covered over. The ragged strips of orange and green might evoke a brighter world, but that is gone now, covered over by a night that — in this domain, at least — is permanent. What cotillion are these women on their way to? What happens when the geyser stops spouting? We have no idea what will happen next.



Katherine Bradford, "Storm at Sea" (2016), acrylic on canvas, 80 x 68 inches

In "Storm at Sea" (2016), five dowdy, white-haired figures (or are they wearing bathing caps?) in flesh-colored bathing suits are standing in the bottom half of the composition.

They are facing a series of scratched lines and agitated brushstrokes above them, seemingly unable to decide what to do next. There are at least six reflections for the five figures, with the one on the far left unattached to any body.

In each of the three paintings I have described, Bradford has depicted figures and abstract elements, giving each equal weight. Is the figure jumping toward the moon the artist's expression of a desire for freedom, or an awareness of how the individual can achieve such leaps only through magic (the wand)? By inviting viewers to complete a story that cannot be completed, she suspends us in a pictorial never-never land, between arrival and falling. The moon jumper inverts the story of Daedalus and Icarus. There is no sun to fly too close to. Wings did not lift this figure through layers of clouds to the cold air above the earth — a wand seems to have done it. Where does one find such a thing? Perhaps it can only be found in a painting.



Katherine Bradford, "Pond Swimmers" (2016), acrylic on canvas. 68 x 80 inches

When Bradford crops the head of the man lying along the bottom edge of “Pond Swimmers” (2016), she introduces a note of unexpected and unexplained violence. Who lies sunbathing at night? The woman floating on the water in the middle of the painting is unaware of anything or anyone else: she is literally and metaphorically in her own world, as is the figure above her, facing away and approaching the upper right-hand corner, with only his head and a part of his back visible above the dark blue water.

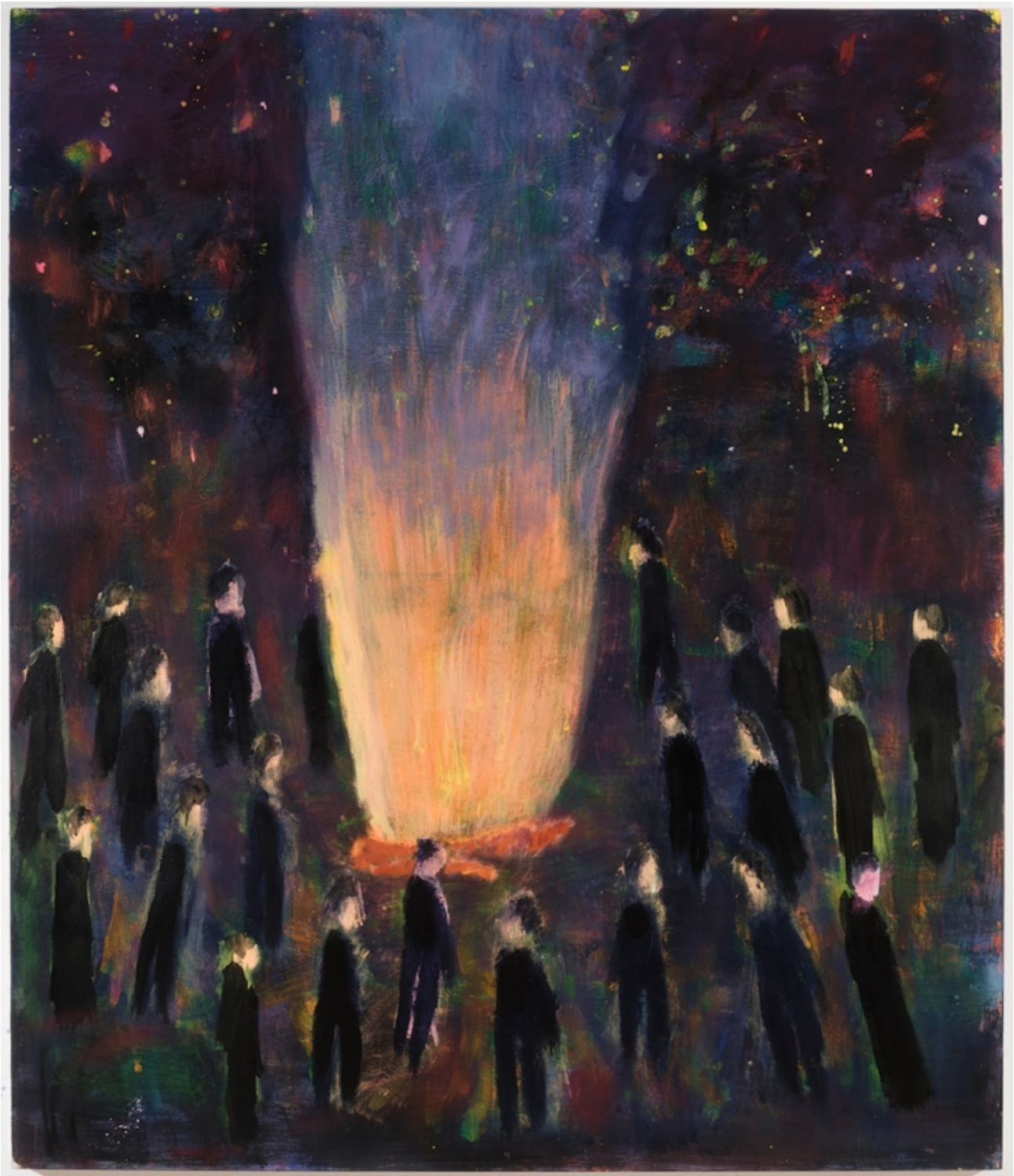
What about the body arched just below the water in “Shell Seeker, Large Night” (2016)? That arched pose recalls that moment in sci-fi films when the characters are transported onto the alien spacecraft hovering above.

Looking at the appropriately titled ‘Bonfire’ (2016), you would most likely ask why all those dark-haired men in suits and long black coats are circling a huge bonfire? Each of paintings evokes a nocturnal world (a kind of Hades for swimmers), where death, violence, and disaster seem to be inseparable from the circumstances. Despite the casualness with which everything appears to be painted, I was reminded of these lines from William Butler Yeats’ poem “Easter 1916”

What is it but nightfall?
No, no, not night but death;
Was it needless death after all?

Need I remind you how the poem ends: “A terrible beauty is born.”

[Katherine Bradford](#) continues at *Sperone Westwater* (257 Bowery, Bowery, Manhattan) through February 11.



Katherine Bradford, "Bonfire" (2016), acrylic on canvas, 80 x 68 inches