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Helmke, Juliet. "Katherine Bradford on Her New Paintings at Sperone Westwater."
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Left: *Bonfire*, 2016. Acrylic on canvas, 80 x 68 in. Right: *Geyser Gowns*, 2016. Acrylic on canvas, 60 x 48 in. (Courtesy of the artist and CANADA, New York)

Katherine Bradford's latest exhibition — and her first outing at downtown stalwart Sperone Westwater Gallery — opened on January 7. In the essay that accompanies the show, artist Chris Martin, who works mostly in abstractions that include glitter, collage, and bright swathes of color, recalls sharing a studio with Bradford in the early 1980s; of the two painters swapping canvases for the other to experiment with when one had a work that was going nowhere; and of the years since, in which they've been a support, critic, and friend to each other, growing into the styles for which both are now known. He concludes, "I feel we are finally becoming the young painters we always wanted to be." In her conversation with Artinfo, Bradford speaks about the figures that occupy these deep, yawning blue and purple astral landscapes, and her journey out of abstraction.

This is your first time exhibiting with the gallery. How did the show with Sperone Westwater come about?

Angela Westwater and I have known each other for many years. We actually both moved to New York the same year, after college. We had a lot of friends in common, we often were at the same gatherings, and I don't know if you know this but around that time, she was managing editor of *Artforum*, which interested me a lot as a person who was aspiring to be an artist. She then went on to start Sperone Westwater. At that point our two careers were very wide apart. She was head of a top gallery, and I was an artist trying to navigate the art world. However she was always wonderful very welcoming — I would visit the gallery often and she would give me catalogues for the shows that she was doing.

How long had the idea been floating around? Was it an ongoing conversation?

This was a very recent idea. I was delighted that she wanted to come to my studio this fall. And when she asked me to show some work at the gallery we both realized it was a great time to do it.

What were you working on at the time she visited your studio?

She came in the fall of 2016, after my show at CANADA and by then I had done all new work. She selected the ones on view, which I call nocturnes. I'm not working exclusively in this color range, I'm also doing work that are brighter, and they will be in some of the shows coming up for me. But for the six works on view in this show we liked the consistency of the nocturnes.

Do these follow on from the CANADA show in some way? There are some visual motifs that viewers will see here that are recognizable from the show at CANADA — the image of people swimming, for example.

In terms of being a continuation of that work that was on view at CANADA: yes and no. Many of them are swimming pictures with those figures in them. Being nocturnes, the first thing one might notice is that they are quite dark, so I do feel that it's a continuation of my interest in putting people in outer space. One painting is called *Moon Jumper*, in which you see a person with a wand, right in front of the moon in the setting of outer space. There is another large painting called bonfire of people gathered around a blazing fire, and they're all dressed in black. So there are some non-swimming paintings, but even these are exploring this concept or visual idea of placing figures in a void.

Tell me a little more about introducing representational imagery into your work.

I consider myself a mark maker. The imagery that I use grew out of those painterly strokes. Most of my friends are abstract painters and the artists we admired together, early on, were all perusing abstraction. So for a while, putting people in my work was just a place I thought I didn't really want to go. I didn't want the baggage of the history of representational art. Even now, I would say I'm not very interested in representing things. What I am interested in is creating images out of paint. I'm interested in the language of paint. And I finally let myself put people in the work by looking at artists I admired—people like A. R. Penck, Carroll Dunham, and Basquiat, for example—who continued a very painterly practice, and at the same time put figures in their work.

In either your experience, or in speaking with abstract painters, how do you think composing a work differs when you are using a reference, or recognizable imagery?

Well I think the two, abstract and representation, are closer together than they have been in the past. I think that putting people in my paintings made them much more emotional — they suddenly had an emotional content. This is a point of debate of course, because for example, Agnes Martin thought felt that her work was emotional. And I think it continues to be debated. However in my experience, I discovered that instead of having less freedom and room to explore, by putting people in my work I felt like I had room, I found more ideas—more ways to make a painting. It opened things up for me.

Can you give us a sneak peak into anything else you might have coming up this year?

It's still in the planning stages, but Phong Bui of the *Brooklyn Rail* will curate a traveling show that includes Chris Martin, Peter Acheson, and me. At the moment it is tentatively titled "Built to Last" and we're hoping it will be on view in New York somewhere, but more information on that coming soon.