

Carpenter Center

IN
CONVERSATION

DIEDRICK
BRACKENS AND

KATHERINE
BRADFORD

for the Visual Arts

IN CONVERSATION
Diedrick Brackens and Katherine Bradford
May 6, 2021

Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts,
Harvard University

This conversation took place over Zoom at 7:30 p.m. EST on Thursday, May 6, 2021. This publication is the ninth in a series of edited transcripts that record the Carpenter Center's public programs during the COVID-19 pandemic.

* * *

DAN BYERS : Hi, everyone. I'm Dan Byers, the John R. and Barbara Robinson Family Director of the Carpenter Center. I want to thank you all for joining us for our last event of the season.

The organization and presentation of our Carpenter Center Conversations series and publishing program that follows is a true team effort. I want to thank my colleagues, Liv Porte, Curatorial and Public Programs Assistant; Laura Preston, Administrative and Outreach Coordinator; and Gabby Banks, Gallery and Bookshop Attendant, for all of their amazing work on this series. As we close out the season, I want to point out the enormous amount of work that goes on behind the scenes of organizing and hosting these events and editing and producing the subsequent booklets. Laura, Liv, and Gabby have made this series possible, and I'm really grateful to them.

This September, the Carpenter Center will present a two-person exhibition of tapestries by Diedrick Brackens and paintings by Katherine Bradford. I'd done studio visits with Diedrick and Katherine right before

the pandemic, as I was doing research for a larger exhibition around figuration. I was still thinking through this show on figuration when the pandemic hit, and Diedrick's and Katherine's work stuck with me. That larger exhibition instead became a conversation between these two artists. Their works resonated within our moment of heightened emotion and isolation and introspection in the midst of profound change to our social, economic, and even hygienic realities. Both artists create dreamlike scenes that snap back and forth between the symbolic and the specific. Details speak to lived experience as well as collective histories and memories. Nature and culture mix in unexpected ways. With parallel interest in materiality and the act of making, both artists use the specific physical and chromatic qualities of their chosen mediums—paint and yarn—to create ambiguous pictorial spaces that frame the relationships between bodies. Their scenes seem to exist both outside and deeply embedded within this uncertain time, evoking cautions, questions, and desires about our bodies in relation to each other.

Diedrick Brackens makes figurative and abstract tapestries using techniques drawn from West African weaving, quilting traditions of the American South, and European tapestry-making. With an interest in allegory and symbolism, his works combine autobiographical narrative with imagery evoking broader histories of Black and queer identities. Each weaving renders an iconic

tactile and tender presentation of experiences that feel at once personal and historical.

Katherine Bradford is a painter who sets characters from her imagination against vast expanses like the ocean and outer space, or within cropped, abstract fields of color. She creates her characters with an economy of painterly marks. They often lack facial features and are sometimes only partially clothed. Against color fields that recall the luminous surfaces of mid-century abstraction, her figures play out scenes of adventure, solitude, collectivity, and intimacy.

With previous conversations in this series, I've usually gotten out of the way after my introduction, but tonight, since I was the one who invited Diedrick and Katherine to show together, I thought I should stick around and participate in the conversation. Before we get started with our conversation, we'll bring some art into the room. I'll hand it over to Diedrick first, who will walk us through some recent work. Then Katherine will do the same. Then we'll talk together and open it up to questions from the audience.

DIEDRICK BRACKENS : Thank you for having me. That was a beautiful introduction. I'm grateful for everyone's work on this exhibition and for getting to be in conversation with Katherine.

I wanted to start by talking about works that I've made in the last year or so. This particular work, *blessed are*



Diedrick Brackens, *blessed are the mosquitoes*, 2020. Cotton and acrylic yarn. 82 x 79 in. © Diedrick Brackens. Courtesy of the artist, Jack Shainman Gallery, New York, and Various Small Fires, Los Angeles.

the mosquitoes, is from a body of work I made last year, and that I had been thinking about from the fall of 2019 until right when the pandemic hit. I'd been thinking a lot about the HIV crisis. At the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, we were about forty years removed from the epicenter of the HIV crisis. I read a 2016 statistic from the CDC that reported that one in two "Black men who have sex with men," to use their language, would be diagnosed with HIV during their lifetime. The statistic was crippling to reckon with. Why did they project one in two for Black men versus one in six for the general population and one in eleven for white men? It was staggering to think about how this group of folks that I belong to was bearing the brunt of this apocalypse.

This work was meant to be in a show of the same title at Jack Shainman Gallery in April 2020. That did not happen because of the realities we've all been living through for the last year. It was really hard to then look at this work in the midst our current moment.

This work, *we inherit the labyrinth*, is from an exhibition at the Scottsdale Museum of Contemporary Art in Arizona. That exhibition is entitled *ark of bullrushes* [SMoCA, February 20–August 22, 2021].

For this work, I was looking at a lot of quilt patterns, thinking about the underground railroad, and thinking about navigation both generally and broadly, through physical space and psychological space. I was creating works that were trying to think about this need to



Diedrick Brackens, *we inherit the labyrinth*, 2021. Cotton and acrylic yarn. 93 x 78 in. © Diedrick Brackens. Courtesy of the artist, Jack Shainman Gallery, New York, and Various Small Fires, Los Angeles.

navigate towards selfhood, towards freedom and liberation, and thinking about ways that we have done this culturally, the ways we've embedded this need in our mythologies. I was interested in these quilt patterns where you see the big X in the background. There is a contested history around whether or not enslaved folks used quilts hung outside on lines or in windows to navigate their way to freedom. According to some accounts, certain quilt patterns might be encoded with particular directives. What was exciting for me as a weaver was not necessarily the truth of that history but that a group of people who largely would have been unable to read and write might have been the arbiters of a language that was embedded in the hand through making textiles.

That particular history is very compelling to Black folks in this country because of our relationship to quilts and quilt-making. The X-shaped quilt pattern you see in the background of *we inherit the labyrinth* is often known as "drunkard's path." This pattern gave a directive to move in a circuitous route through the landscape to evade capture, death, or harm. This idea of picking your way through a landscape resonates with how a lot of folks of color, queer folks, and other marginalized communities move through the world, and the mental and physical leaps one takes to avoid danger.

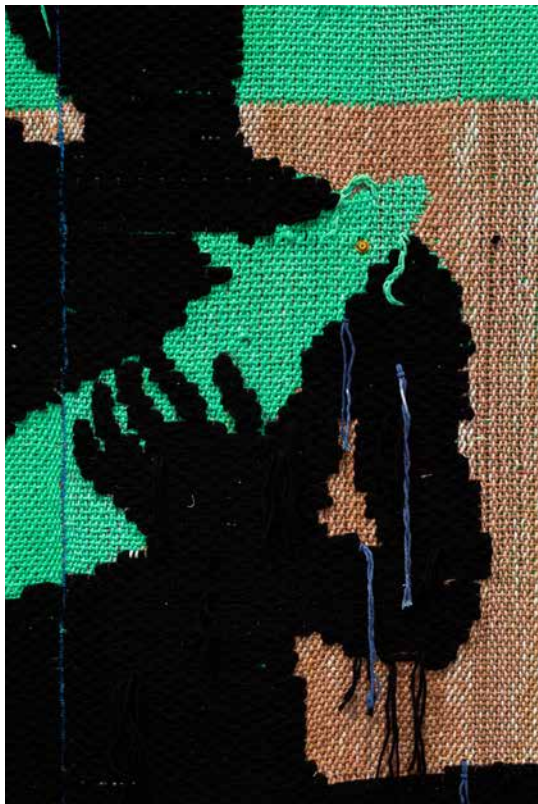
Another work that was in *ark of bullrushes* is *the reasoning beast*. This work was a way for me to think about the other modes we use to navigate the world,

particularly our interiority. The work is a remaking of the constellation Capricorn, which is also my star sign. I was thinking about our relationship to the stars as a navigational tool that helps us move through the physical world, but also how we've used celestial bodies to explore our relationships to ourselves and to others. This work was a self-portrait, in a sense.

This is a close-up of *there is a leak*. It was one of the works that were part of *blessed are the mosquitoes*, the first exhibition I was talking about. In this close-up, you can get a sense of what the threads are doing, how they interlace and cross each other. Something that has shown up in my work for some years now is catfish. They've become a symbol through which I think about myself, think about Blackness, think about Southern-ness, and think about the undesirable. For me to raise up these creatures that are so maligned to the space of tapestry is to be in conversation with tapestry's history, where the animals that were depicted were ones that you would want to align yourself with. You would take on the characteristics of the lion, or the bear, or the unicorn.

It's important for me to use this medium to renegotiate on behalf of the catfish, to take on those identities of the scavenger and the bottom feeder, and to lift these things up to a special space.

Another work is *flying geese*. It was also in *blessed are the mosquitoes*. There were eight tapestries in the show with sixteen figures between them. This particular



Diedrick Brackens, *there is a leak* (detail), 2020. Woven cotton, acrylic yarn, and sewing notions. 85 x 74 in. © Diedrick Brackens. Courtesy of the artist, Jack Shainman Gallery, New York, and Various Small Fires, Los Angeles.

tapestry is about eight-by-eight feet. The previous ones were about six-by-six feet. So they're quite large, and the figures are about three-quarters scale. You get a sense of yourself when you're in front of them. Half of the figures in *blessed are the mosquitoes* had some sort of button, charm, or bobble on the surface to stand in for the virus, and that statistic of one in two. The two black figures in this work are covered with these purple buttons that fall back into the surface of the image until you're in front of it.

This work, *nuclear lovers*, is the first work I made when I didn't know how long we were going to be stuck in the house. For a while, I was caught up in the uncertainty and the novelty of being home all the time. I brought my loom into my house and started thinking about what I was longing for, and those things were touch and the domestic textiles I had around me. So my bed coverings and my curtains inspired the palette that I was working from.

I also started to read poetry and write. I was spending more time doing that than I was in the space of weaving. *nuclear lovers* is inspired by a short poem of the same name by the poet Assotto Saint, who in this poem reflects that when the world ends we will bury ourselves together in each other's embrace, and when the world regenerates it will be because of the love we had for one another.

I just loved this piece. It came from just listening to the house and myself, and spending time thinking about what things we gained and lost, particularly intimacy and touch.



Diedrick Brackens, *nuclear lovers*, 2020. Cotton and acrylic yarn. 78 x 72 in.
© Diedrick Brackens. Collection of the Mohn Family Trust. Courtesy of the artist,
Jack Shainman Gallery, New York, and Various Small Fires, Los Angeles.

grief has no gills is the title of this work. I made it for an exhibition I had in September of 2020 at my Los Angeles gallery, Various Small Fires. I started to do a lot of research on the space that I am from, this place in the middle of Texas called Mexia. It is the place my family has been for some generations, both paternal and maternal. There's a lake in this town with the same name, Lake Mexia, and it is where all of these celebrations have happened, as well as a lot of mourning, both relative to my family and relative to the community. It's a space replete with beauty, joy, and immense loss.

Something I'm conscious of when I make work is that when I reach back to these historical moments there is a lot of pain there, as well as trauma and violence. I always want to think about what other things would have been experienced, and what other things I've experienced in these places and spaces. And one of them is joy, and the excitement of being in water and swimming. One of the things that happened in Lake Mexia was a drowning of three young men in police custody in 1981. So this space becomes a vessel of death. For me, it's important to reify the space and to think about the joy that folks experienced. Swimming over drowning is something I'm particularly interested in bringing into the work.

through the eye unburnt and blameless is the title of this work, and it is from the same series as *grief has no gills*. With this work, I was thinking, as many of us were, about how the events of 2020 resonated with a hundred

years prior. I was thinking about the race riots that happened in the early 1900s, the racial uprisings happening in 2020, pandemics—all of these things mirroring each other. I realized fire was such a prominent part of these stories. It got me thinking about how to depict that idea.

on this intimate earth soak as long as possible is the title of another work. It is also from the same series, but I made it a little while after the exhibition because I just couldn't let go of the ideas, the palette, and the ways that it evoked late summer, the way that sunlight is on water at the end of the day, and its relationship to blood and ancestry and all of the other things that were percolating in the show. There was something about love and intimacy that I wanted to conjure and that I think got left out in the other works in the show.

the crawling stars' signal was in *ark of bullrushes*, the exhibition at the Scottsdale Museum of Contemporary Art. I was taking these quilt patterns and thinking about their relationships to constellations. This particular quilt pattern is called "bear paw," so I was thinking about Ursa Major and Ursa Minor. The figures in this weaving follow the shapes of those constellations. I was thinking about how one might have seen or rearticulated those stars with different symbols or icons overlaid. The significance of the bear paw pattern was that you would follow in the tracks of a bear instead of taking the trail that a person might take. You would risk the possibility of meeting a creature that could maul you over running into a human.



Diedrick Brackens, *grief has no gills*, 2020. Cotton and acrylic yarn. 53 ¼ × 56 in.
© Diedrick Brackens. Courtesy of the artist, Jack Shainman Gallery, New York, and Various Small Fires, Los Angeles.



Diedrick Brackens, *through the eye unburnt and blameless*, 2020. Cotton and acrylic yarn. 98 x 96 in. © Diedrick Brackens. Courtesy of the artist, Jack Shainman Gallery, New York, and Various Small Fires, Los Angeles.



Diedrick Brackens, *the crawling stars' signal*, 2021. Cotton and acrylic yarn. 80 x 79 in. © Diedrick Brackens. Courtesy of the artist, Jack Shainman Gallery, New York, and Various Small Fires, Los Angeles.

BYERS : Thank you so much for that, Diedrick.

KATHERINE BRADFORD : Thank you so much, Dan, for pairing me with Diedrick Brackens. It's pretty exciting and bold. I'm almost always paired with other painters. You've given us both the chance to have this conversation, and I'm seeing my work in a new context, which I love.

Dan asked us to show recent work that won't be in the Carpenter Center show. So these are paintings of mine that are up at Canada, a gallery in New York City. This show, *Mother Paintings*, [was] up through May 15, 2021. These paintings are acrylic on canvas, and many of them are eighty inches high by sixty-eight inches wide. Diedrick's work is about the same size. They're more or less life-sized.

This painting, *Mother's Lap*, is of two people sitting on a lap, perhaps their mother's lap, which is an idea that I stumbled on during the pandemic. I made this last summer when there was high anxiety about the future and our health, our politics, our protests, our elections, our president. I thought being on your mother's lap was a good place to be during all this. To me, it meant solace and caring for one another.

I use water with acrylic and it thins the paint, and that's how I get this kind of layering effect.

This painting is called *Fear of Dark*. Again, I put the people sitting on each other's laps, and I very intentionally made them different colors because I love color and I feel

very comfortable talking about it, much more comfortable than I do talking about race. I'm used to people describing my work in terms of color. I call this *Fear of Dark*. I think nocturnes are very beautiful. And at one point, this painting was covered with a sky with these orbs, like planets or stars. Although this painting is called *Fear of Dark*, I feel that these moments of light are the signs of hope that we were going to get through everything.

Continuing with the theme of sitting on laps is this mother figure. This painting is called *Motherhood*. The title of the show at Canada is *Mother Paintings*, which I didn't mean literally. Well, I don't know what I meant by that title. I just saw at the last minute that there were a lot of mother figures in my paintings.

I noticed that both Dan and Diedrick himself refer to "bodies" in Diedrick's work. But when Dan refers to the figures in my work, he calls them "characters." I thought that was interesting. I'm not sure how I would refer to the people in my paintings. I'm not sure I'd talk about their bodies. I don't think I'd feel comfortable about that. And although I am queer, I noticed Diedrick can easily talk about how he feels about it and can make it the subject of his paintings. I think I gently put rather androgynous people in my paintings, or odd people that I find in my community. I don't think I'm of the generation that has been used to using a "queer" vocabulary.

Here I came right out and did a scene of people caring for each other. It's called *Fever*. The hand coming from



Katherine Bradford, *Mother's Lap*, 2020. Acrylic on canvas. 60 x 48 in.
Courtesy of the artist and Canada, New York. Private collection. Photographed
by Joe DeNardo.



Katherine Bradford, *Fear of Dark*, 2020. Acrylic on canvas. 80 x 60 in. Courtesy
of the artist and Canada, New York. Collection of the Bowdoin College Museum of
Art, Brunswick, ME. Photographed by Joe DeNardo.

the top is on this person's forehead, which is very hot. I think the hands took over, as well as the lines and the blocks of color. I can't really explain what they mean, but I needed them. I needed them compositionally. You know, both Diedrick and I started out doing abstraction. And since he was on a loom, there were a lot of grids of horizontal and vertical lines. I feel interested in composing my paintings along horizontals and verticals. I had to have those arms coming in to the painting. I needed them for the composition. Some people accept that. And some people want me to dig into, "Well, what does that mean?" And I often don't know what that means.

This painting is called *Mother Joins the Circus*. I was kind of in a giddy mood when I did it. My show was coming up, and I worked so hard, so I just did this painting for fun. The mother is maybe me. When I became an artist, my children thought I had joined the circus, that I was going off the deep end. We all have a mother, and we don't actually want her to join the circus. But I did. You might notice that there are patches of canvas up at the top near the heads. That was because I felt the heads weren't very interesting, and if I glued something on the canvas then I could get some kind of experiment going, but it took a little more than that.

By the way, I had the great pleasure of standing in front of Diedrick's tapestries when they were at the New Museum. I was very taken with what he was doing. This was before I knew who he was or knew that we would



Katherine Bradford, *Motherhood*, 2021. Acrylic on canvas. 80 x 68 in. Courtesy of the artist and Canada, New York. Collection of ICA Boston. Photographed by Joe DeNardo.



Katherine Bradford, *Fever*, 2021. Acrylic on canvas. 80 x 68 in. Courtesy of the artist and Canada, New York. Private collection. Photographed by Joe DeNardo.

be paired in a show. The first thing I noticed was that he really liked to experiment. There would be threads coming out of the weaving and hanging down, almost like drips of paint. I was quite fascinated with that because I like mistakes. Obviously, he left these in on purpose. Actually, I don't know how they happened. I'd be interested to know. I see him collaging and layering his pieces, but I saw that he also used a lot of figure-ground reversal, like that bright blue catfish, and that's something that interests me, as well as water.

Another painting is called *Bus Stop*. I put this work in *Mother Paintings* because I thought the color relationships were strong and the relationships between the people were good. There was a nice vertical-horizontal play. I don't put features on the faces of my people because I think in terms of shapes. I guess that's pretty obvious by now. I don't really like to read that my people *lack* facial features. Who wants to read the word *lack* in a description of their artwork?

This is called *Upsetting Times*. The white figure was going to go all the way across the top, but I let it fall into the space between the two other figures, and then the painting looked better. The hands crossed in front of the woman brought in a heightened emotion, which I was going to let in. I thought if I were going to do paintings for a show during a global pandemic, I wanted the heightened emotions we've all been through to be in the paintings. I don't know if it's about grief or joy, or both.



Katherine Bradford, *Mother Joins the Circus*, 2021. Acrylic on canvas. 60 x 72 in. Courtesy of the artist and Canada, New York. Private collection. Photographed by Joe DeNardo.

This is called *Guest for Dinner*. It shows one person with a dinner party going on. I was very conscious that this person was different and excluded and looking on at the people together. And that interested me. I think every artist I know feels different, excluded, singular, and they've witnessed a lot of gatherings that they do or do not belong to.

This painting, *Singular Man* [p. 52], is the first painting I did of the series. After I did it, I wanted to put that kind of drawn line in my work, which I hadn't before, but then I got impatient with it, and I took my brush—sometimes I use very big brushes—and I scribbled over the bottom. It looked so much better that I left it. I find that I make decisions with my eyes, and I choose my colors with my eyes. I take things out and put things in as visual decisions.

Another work, *Magenta Free*, hearkens back to a lot of paintings I've done of swimmers or people in water. It's such a wonderful subject because water and paint are so much alike that they provided the perfect ground for me to experiment, and go back and forth, and take out parts of their bodies and then put them in. This piece ties to earlier work of mine.

BYERS : Thank you, Katherine and Diedrick. I'm sure there's a lot you want to ask each other. I have one question to start us off, and it's around process. Maybe it's a way to get at some other questions around words like "body," "figure," or "character." One reason I use the word



Katherine Bradford, *Upsetting Times*, 2020. Acrylic on canvas. 72 x 60 in.
Courtesy of the artist and Canada, New York. Private collection. Photographed
by Joe DeNardo.



Katherine Bradford, *Guest for Dinner*, 2021. Acrylic on canvas. 80 x 68 in.
Courtesy of the artist and Canada, New York. Private collection. Photographed
by Joe DeNardo.

“character” to describe your work, Katherine, is because your figures often wear accessories or fragments of clothing that suggest a certain job, or a certain role in a family or culture. That’s how “character” came to me.

One way to get to the bodies, figures, and protagonists that are so present in both of your works is to think about how those bodies come out of the materials that you’re using. Diedrick, maybe you can talk about your process of framing out these tapestries and how those bodies emerge both in preparation and also physically in the material. Katherine, I’d be interested to hear the same from you in terms of paint, and whether you’re finding the figures in the painting or whether you begin with relationships in mind.

DB : I was interested to think about the language of “body,” because I think it’s a word that I’ve inherited. Lately, there have been more conversations about using that word over one like “people.” For me, because my work is a depiction, I suppose, I’m interested in continuing to use the word “body.” It’s open enough for me to put a lot of things inside it.

The process of finding them in the thread is really about constraint. I’ll know that I want a full figure or most of a figure to be in that space so that when someone’s in front of it, it’s synaptic; you feel it as yourself. You can think about what it’s doing, and how its body is moving through space relative to your own.

KB : The word “body,” to me, is very erotic, and I feel shy about using it.

DB : I love that.

BYERS : There’s a relationship to this question of ambiguity versus detail and clarity, in thinking about Diedrick’s use of the silhouette. Although it’s really important that you embellish those silhouettes to give some material addition that may function in the same way that the underwear might be on one of Katherine’s figures. Katherine, your obliteration of facial features does another thing to reduce these people who could be people to something else, whether it’s “characters” or “bodies.” We don’t have to get too bogged down in the semantics, but I think there’s a relationship to the material there as well.

KB : I don’t feel that I “obliterate” the features. I feel the faces don’t need features. I want them to be characters, but also everyman. I want them to stand for all of us.

DB : That resonates with me, too—allowing everyone to take a piece, or get in there a little bit. I’m interested in your aversion to the erotic.

BYERS : Katherine, you talked about the relationship between water and paint. Diedrick, when you were talking,

I made a note about the relationship between weaving and water, because visually there's a moiré effect that seems to evoke water as much as the liquid nature of paint. Water is a dominant force in both of your works and has a relationship to the mediums in which you're working. I wonder if you could each say some more about that.

KB : I would take a big brush and I would stroke on the paint unevenly, and it looked like water. If I sat and meditated with it a while, I would want to put something in it. For a long time I put boats in it, and gradually I put people in it. I think I made a mistake to make those people be swimmers and put bathing suits on them, because I got connected to the history of bathers in art, which I don't want to be connected with. But what I realized was that my audience was much, much bigger once I put people in my work with bathing suits on. Maybe it was easier for people to understand or relate to.

DB: The very nature of dyeing yarn brought me close to water, just in the material and the physical properties of making textiles. Ever since I can remember making art, I was interested in telling stories that somehow involved water, drowning in particular. I started to want to tell other stories that didn't have the same gruesome outcome, so I started to invite catfish and swimmers in. I began thinking about water not as resting place but a place of birth, and leisure, and all these other things.

KB : You *knew* water. You lived in a place where there were catfish.

DB : Yes. I did not learn to swim until I was in the ninth grade. I was afraid of water in a very particular way, in the same way that I found it beautiful. Now I love it. But I'm not as interested in the ocean as I am a lake or a pond, something a little more contained.

KB : When I started to paint, I was living on the coast of Maine on a peninsula. I could see in the distance water on both sides. I could smell the water. More importantly, there was so much art up there with water in it. If you were going to be a painter in Maine, you started to do water. I guess I was trying to get my credentials in order and started to do water paintings. It came very naturally. When I go to a beach now, I look out at the whole scene and I just feel so at home visually.

But I also noticed, Diedrick, that you like transparency, and you play with it. It's such a satisfying thing to do on this flat surface, to be able to see through one shape to another shape.

It's exciting to me. And I like to do it over and over again.

DB : Absolutely. I was looking at some of the images you were showing today, and I could see your impulses with transparencies. I could identify similar decisions I've

made with my weavings. You were also saying something I love: "I don't know," or "I needed it." I wish I said that more. I love the admission of the impulse. I also have those moments where I think, "I don't know why I'm doing it this way, but I know that it will be right."

KB : I think we should coin the term "impulse artist." I just feel like doing something and I do it. I don't think I would have done that as a younger artist.

I noticed when you're talking, you're making your hands go like this [*interlaces fingers*]. I think of the grid.

BYERS : Diedrick, how much impulse are you able to build into your process? Is it a process of planning and following through? Obviously, there's some improvisation, but how does that happen with the weaving?

DB : I try to balance them. I would say my process is heavier on planning than it is on impulse, but I try to leave areas unplanned, or areas that I'm not sure how to resolve. There are moments after I'm weaving where I'm stitching things or mimicking the weaving with thread and string to close up gaps. Even when I'm weaving, I'll reinvent an arm, or add something else. Or I'll play against depiction and go back to the grid; I'll weave some kind of pattern or checkers, something that pulls closer to weaving history. I like having those interruptions to the trueness of a figure.

BYERS : I was struck by the beautiful evocation of hands in a lot of the works you both showed. Katherine, I saw your show at Canada in person today, and I got to see close up the way that hands are interacting. And Diedrick, there are moments in your weavings where the silhouette breaks as a solid form and goes into a linear, outlined moment. Those moments with hands are some of the key interactions between humans and seem key to notions of care, especially in care through touch.

DB : I think as I've gone deeper into making the work, I spend an intense amount of time making the drawings. There are things that I can do with a pencil on paper that don't translate when I sit down at the loom. But I don't ever feel the need to push the weaving towards mimicry, or excellence of a certain kind of line. Over time I've come to a place where I can allow myself to be a little bit more irreverent and can collage or stitch towards an ideal. I was trained with textile people on the mechanics of weaving, but I went to graduate school with painters who were asking all these questions about their material and surface, things that I'd never come across.

I was trying to filter these exciting new conversations through a different kind of "painting." I remember sitting in class and people being like, "Let's look at these images from fifteenth-century painters and just look at the hands." I was really compelled by that, because often when you're depicting a hand in weaving, you end up just

making a nub. You can't articulate digits easily with those tools. So I started to invite line back in.

KB : Because the shapes that I use to build my figures are very generalized—circles, squares, and stripes for the most part—the hands and feet add another scale and give me the opportunity to be more precise and to bring in the language of hands.

BYERS : Hands seem to be really important drivers of any kind of narrative. As viewers, we can start to think about what the relationships between these figures might be.

Before we get to some audience questions, I wonder if you could talk about color a little. Katherine, you said you're more comfortable thinking about your work through the frame of color than race, so I'm thinking about the relationships between race and color. Diedrick, you are very intentional with your depictions of Black bodies—there's that word "bodies" again. There's also a range of potential skin tones in your work, Katherine.

I'm also interested in color as an organizing factor in your works in general. I'm so looking forward to installing the show together and trying to activate the formal relationships between your works. I think it's going to be amazing. But I'm also wondering about that spectrum of color from its social definition to a formal use in your work.

KB : For a long time, the bodies were the source of light in my paintings. My paintings would be dark, and the flesh would be the light. Then I realized I should branch out because I was making my people all the same color. So I challenged myself to get beyond that. In *Mother Paintings*, I purposely made my characters all different colors.

One word that's been used to describe my work is "luminous." I don't think I made so many luminous paintings this time around. I think this time the work was more about color relationships. One reason was—well, I just wasn't into making luminous paintings, except for maybe that one called *Fear of Dark*, which is a night painting. But you know, people still say to me, "Do you have any of those nice cosmic night paintings with planets in the sky?" So perhaps I'll do some more.

DB : I resonate with some of the things you are saying, Katherine. The reverse is true for me. In my early work, the figures were always black, and they were against these splashy or pastel backgrounds. During the pandemic, one of the things that started to happen internally for me was that I started to ask myself if my work was getting to the point where people could write the review of the work without looking at the work. I felt like I was starting to see this pattern where each piece of text seemed almost identical to the last, even though the works were different.

I started to make the figures different colors, and I was less reliant on coloring them black. It's still true that my subjectivity is Black. I see the world as Black, so I often think of the figure, even if the figure is blue, as Black. So then it became less important that I rely on the device of making them black to signify to a viewer that they are Black.

I think color is the perfect jacket. It brings people into the work and evokes many different feelings. It takes people to places or to textiles they're familiar with before they get into the content. The presence of color can envelop a viewer before they even think about what's going on between the figures, the shapes, or the lines.

KB : When you were doing more abstract works that didn't have people in them at all, you were paying a lot of attention to color. You used color. I always keep my eye out for artists that use color, which is just my way of saying that it's something I really appreciate. It's such a powerful tool for speaking in visual terms. I love color.

BYERS : And I love your phrase, Diedrick, of color as a jacket. That's one I'll take with me.

I want to get to a few questions from our audience. I'm going to combine two questions. There's someone asking you, Diedrick, about whether you're influenced visually by the quilts of Gee's Bend, and then Katherine, whether there are specific artists that inspired you for your recent show at Canada.

Maybe you could each talk about artists that have influenced you either recently or more generally.

DB : I'll be more general. In response to the question about Gee's Bend, I was going to say, "Yes, next question." It's especially apparent in my abstractions. That influence has gone a little more underground in the work now, but it's still very much there. Those quilts changed the trajectory of what I would have made had I not seen them in undergrad. The improvisation, the remixing and corruption of known forms is something I still think a lot about, and it's the reason why I try to only have so much of a plan and then build around it rather than make a sketch and then weave. I prefer to deviate or surprise myself.

KB : I saw that an artist like Matisse was using that dark line around his figures, both to describe them but also not to describe them. What I liked was when Matisse went out of the line and used it as pattern and was very loose with it. It looked like he would do the painting over and over again. You'd see little pieces of flesh color, but then you'd see green on the arm or something. So that influenced me. When I start my paintings, I put color down and I think of Stanley Whitney and those marvelous blocks of great color. He puts one color next to another color. And Chris Martin. Both these painters are friends of mine, and they both use a lot of color next to color in great ways.

So I would put color down like that, and then I'd try and make it into my painting by putting bodies in it.

BYERS : Speaking of bodies, there's another question here that asks, "It feels like the figures in both of your works support the other figures in the piece with love or comfort. How do you think about support?" I'll add "love" and "comfort" to "support," as well. We can choose from those three words.

KB : I think that's a great subject to paint about. I'd rather do that than paint about violence or hate.

I'm not a political painter. Sometimes I think I just don't have enough rage. However, after this last year, I've built up a little bit of rage. [*Laughing*]

DB : At the center of my work is an interest in tenderness and restraint, that moment before embrace. I think about these two figures touching as a romantic impulse but also as a stand-in for how we relate to each other, an interest in community.

BYERS : There is violence in your work as well, Diedrick. So in some ways, I'm thinking about care and support defined in an oppositional way by some of the trauma that's pictured explicitly.

I'm going to zigzag between the big questions and technical questions here. There's a question about what

kind of looms you use, Diedrick, as well as a question, Katherine, about your conscious decision not to paint with oils but with acrylics. So maybe we can get into your ways of making.

DB : I've got three looms. They are floor looms. Two of them are eight harnesses, or shafts, and one is ten. They all have names. [*Laughing*] I work on a pretty traditional floor loom.

KB : But you are sewing your strips together. It makes an interesting scene. And I think you take advantage of that.

DB : Absolutely. I love working in that restrictive space and trying to be as inventive as possible.

KB : The reason I switched from oil to acrylic is that I fell in love with fluorescent colors, which you can't get in oil paint. In order to get that luminosity, I use fluorescent magenta and fluorescent yellow. Although with this last show, my fluorescent colors are a little more in check.

To me, acrylic was a more casual pot of paint. I could use great big painter brushes and dip them in a big pot of paint. I felt like a different kind of painter. If I had a palette, I was mixing it with little brushes. Physically, acrylics helped me relax and paint bigger, which was a goal of mine. I wanted to do larger paintings for larger spaces.

BYERS : We're going to go from small to big again, so here's a little conversational whiplash. There's an audience member who comments, "I love the synergy between you two through the respect for each other's practices. What qualities are you looking for in your communities and support systems around your practices?"

KB : Well, I have a few friends who will tell me what they don't like about what I'm doing, and they're very valuable to me, although sometimes I feel like punching them. I don't want to get to the point where people won't tell me what they don't like.

My gallery did studio visits before the *Mother Paintings* show. I sent twenty-one paintings to the gallery, and there were eleven paintings in the show, so that's a lot of editing. Plus there was a lot of editing going on before that. I really appreciate that. I don't think all galleries do that for their artists, but the partners at Canada were very vigilant about keeping me on track. It was an enormous help.

DB : I also have the benefit of great gallery partnerships with Various Small Fires and Jack Shainman Gallery. Conversely, I sometimes make a mess in terms of what the work is, how it gets done, and when it gets done. I'm a little contrary in my own desires. Often I'm like, "I know I laid out this whole idea, but I can't make that." My galleries have been very supportive, and things have turned out well.

In terms of my larger community, it's a lot of folks who are making craft or slow work who I can have conversations with and sharpen myself against. There is an intimacy and trust in those relationships, and they're able to draw me out and help me articulate what the vision is and what it might need materially and financially.

KB : The conversations are really important. I used to write down all the conversations I had.

DB : [*Laughing*] I've been taking notes, Katherine.

BYERS : There are a few questions from the audience that connect around time, labor, and the state you're in when making work. An audience member observes that both of your works seem meditative, and asks whether you meditate. Another person asks if, when making art, you go into a flow state, and if so, how you maintain it over time. Maybe we can braid those questions together and think about how time and the experience of making plays out in the works.

KB : Every artist I know has said how much they've valued the lockdown, as it's given them more space and time to make their work. We're used to being alone a lot, so that part was not so hard.

I don't meditate, but I think over the years it's become familiar to spend a day alone. When I get home, my

spouse will say to me, "Did you talk to anyone today?" Sometimes I say, "No, I didn't, actually. Let's talk." But I try and keep my studio life quiet. I don't play music and I don't talk on the phone much.

DB : I feel a great kinship with that. In terms of the flow state, there are times where I can work and stop and work and stop, and it's fine. Or I can take a call. I can go run an errand and come back. And then there are times where it feels like a fever. I resent every interruption. I don't want to leave to go eat. I am annoyed that I have to get up and go to the bathroom. I'm annoyed at anything that stops me from being in the work—or making the drawing, or weaving, or dyeing the yarn, it could be any point in the process. There are times where I feel like what's happening will not happen if I leave it. I've tried to build better systems to accommodate that. Sometimes I can feel the storm brewing, and I think, "All the bills have to be paid and the meals have to be made today because I will not do anything that relates to taking care of my life until this moment passes." Sometimes that comes at great cost, but I have to prioritize the work and when it wants to get done.

KB : That's pretty impressive, because you're very young.

DB : It's the Capricorn in me.

BYERS : There's a question here that asks, "What do you think is churning the huge wave of artists working in figurative modes?" The three of us talked about this together as I was working through my motivations for doing a show around figuration, and how I happily ended up with you two. I was thinking a lot about the relationship between materiality and the way in which figures, bodies, or characters emerge from these embodied, physical things that cannot be reduced to images and have to be contended with as objects. For me, that's one thing that separates some of your work from a lot of the figurative work that is going on.

That's one unsolicited thought from me on the subject. Are you in conversation with other artists around this? Are you staging these conversations in your head?

KB : I've seen these periods come and go. I was part of an early group of painters in Williamsburg, Brooklyn. We were all abstract painters, and I saw that change to figuration. So I'm bracing myself for people to get really sick of figuration, because I don't know how long it's going to last. There's quite a hunger for it at this time.

Someone said, "Boy, that's really brave of you to call your exhibit *Mother Paintings*," because women admitting they were mothers and talking about their children was just poison and showed that you were going to be sentimental and not serious and so on. That just shows me how much has changed. There are a lot of females

making art that is extremely important. There are a lot of females leading the art world. I think that's part of the change. And the great interest in our identity, in who we are as people, and not so much in the shape of a painting or the hole in the ground or those kinds of questions. I think social media has something to do with it, although I'm not sure I could put that into words.

DB : I agree. A lot of it has to do with representation and who is making art. And one of the easiest ways to get a viewer to see people in spaces they've never seen before is to depict them.

I also think there are questions around accessibility. I don't necessarily think that the people who are depicting figures are doing it because it's hot. I think that the people who are doing it are being sought out because of accessibility. There is a way we can understand and read figuration, whereas maybe the consumers of art are still trying to figure out how to make it through these more academic modes of making.

KB : You were just going around to a lot of shows in New York, Dan. Did you feel it was figuration and more figuration?

BYERS : Not entirely at all.

I'm really fascinated by both of your answers and, in particular, this idea of representation and who is

being represented, and that idea as a pivot to announce what kind of subjectivity is important or worthy of our attention.

DB : I think many things are happening even inside of one person's practice; it's just what we are attuned to, or what I am happy looking at and making.

BYERS : It should be said that one important part of each of your practices is the conversation between figuration and abstraction. There are two works by you in our show, Diedrick, that are abstract. It's very easy to read your work, Katherine, as being between figuration and abstraction. So we're not being reduced to just a figurative reading here.

We have reached our close, and hopefully we can continue this conversation publicly when the show opens in September. I just want to thank you both for being a part of this program, and also for being on this long journey of a several-times-delayed exhibition over the course of this year. Thank you both so much, and take care.

DIEDRICK BRACKENS

Diedrick Brackens (b. 1989, Mexia, TX; lives in Los Angeles, CA) received a BFA from the University of North Texas and an MFA in textiles from California College of the Arts. He has held solo exhibitions at Jack Shainman Gallery, New York, and Various Small Fires, Los Angeles/Seoul. Other solo exhibitions include the New Museum, New York; the Ulrich Museum of Art, Wichita; the University of North Texas, Denton; and The University of the South, Sewanee, TN. Recent group exhibitions include Alabama Contemporary Art Center, Mobile; the Hammer Museum, Los Angeles; the Contemporary Jewish Museum, San Francisco; and Dimensions Variable, Miami. Brackens's work is in the permanent collections of the Brooklyn Museum; Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art, Bentonville, AR; the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston (MFAH); the Hammer Museum, Los Angeles; Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA); the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles (MOCA); and the RISD Museum, Providence, RI.

KATHERINE BRADFORD

Katherine Bradford (b. 1942, New York, NY; lives in New York and Brunswick, ME) started painting at the age of thirty while living in Maine and was among the group of artists who moved to Williamsburg, Brooklyn, in the 1980s. Bradford has exhibited widely at institutions such as MoMA PS1, New York; the Brooklyn Museum; the

Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth, TX; Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art, Bentonville, AR; the Frances Young Tang Teaching Museum, Skidmore College, NY; and the Ogden Museum of Southern Art, New Orleans, as part of the fourth Prospect New Orleans Triennial. Her work is included in collections such as the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; the Brooklyn Museum; the Dallas Museum of Art; the Menil Collection, Houston; the Nerman Museum of Contemporary Art, Overland Park, KS; and the Portland Museum of Art, ME. Her work has been shown at galleries, including Canada, Sperone Westwater, and Pace Gallery in New York; Campoli Presti, London and Paris; Haverkamp Galerie, Berlin; and Adams and Ollman, Portland, OR, among others. Bradford is the recipient of a Guggenheim Foundation Fellowship and a Joan Mitchell Foundation Grant. She has taught at institutions such as the Yale School of Art, Skowhegan School of Painting & Sculpture, and the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Philadelphia. A recent monograph, *Katherine Bradford: Paintings*, was published by Canada in 2018. In 2022, Bradford will be the subject of a retrospective organized by the Portland Museum of Art in Maine.

DIEDRICK BRACKENS AND KATHERINE BRADFORD
EXHIBITION CHECKLIST
SEPTEMBER 24 – DECEMBER 23, 2001

DIEDRICK BRACKENS

invisible life, 2017. Woven cotton yarn, chroma key, gloves, and handheld mirror. 87 × 44 in. Private collection, London.

rouge test, 2017. Woven cotton and mirrored acrylic. 59 × 39 in. The Komal Shah & Gaurav Garg Collection.

american wedding, 2019. Cotton and acrylic yarn. 96 × 96 in. Courtesy of the artist.

maximum depth, 2020. Cotton and acrylic yarn. 81 × 80 in. Collection of Michael Sherman.

nuclear lovers, 2020. Cotton and acrylic yarn. 96 × 66 in. Collection of the Mohn Family Trust.

shape of a fever believer, 2020. Woven cotton and acrylic yarn. 84 × 82 in. Collection of Steve Corkin and Dan Maddalena.

ward no. 2 be careful, 2020. Cotton and acrylic yarn. 79 × 80 ½ in. Collection of Adrienne and Chris Birchby, Austin, TX.

KATHERINE BRADFORD

Brothers, 2017. Acrylic on canvas. 80 × 68 in. Collection of Catherine Montgomery, New York.

All of Us, 2018. Acrylic on canvas. Diptych: 80 × 136 in. Collection of Gina and Jacky Aizenman.

Boxers Under Lights, 2018. Acrylic on canvas. 80 × 68 in. Joseph M. Cohen Family Collection.

One Man's Tub, 2018. Acrylic on canvas. 72 × 60 in. Private collection, California.

New Shoes, 2019. Acrylic on canvas. 68 × 80 in. Collection of Mathias Kessler and Kelly Padden.

Mother Knows, 2020. Acrylic on canvas. 72 × 60 in. Courtesy of the artist and Adams and Ollman, Portland, OR.

Mother's Lap, 2020. Acrylic on canvas. 60 × 48 in. Collection of Matt Ross.

COLOPHON

In Conversation:
Diedrick Brackens and
Katherine Bradford

Published by the Carpenter
Center for the Visual Arts,
Harvard University

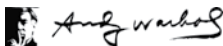
Editors: John Ewing and Dan Byers
Publication and Program
Coordinator: Liv Porte
Designer: Chad Kloepper

Staff:
Gabrielle Banks, Gallery and
Bookshop Attendant
Dan Byers, John R. and Barbara
Robinson Family Director
Liv Porte, Curatorial and Public
Programs Assistant
Katie Soule, Exhibitions Production
Assistant
Francesca Williams, Exhibitions
Manager / Registrar

© 2021 the authors, the artists,
Carpenter Center for the
Visual Arts, and the President and
Fellows of Harvard College

All rights reserved. No part of
this book may be reproduced
without written permission by the
publishers.

Generous support for Carpenter
Center programming is provided
by The Andy Warhol Foundation
for the Visual Arts.



The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts

Carpenter Center for the
Visual Arts, Harvard University
24 Quincy Street
Cambridge, MA 02138
carpenter.center



Katherine Bradford, *Singular
Man*, 2020. Acrylic on
canvas. 80 × 68 in. Courtesy
of the artist and Canada,
New York. Private collec-
tion. Photographed by Joe
DeNardo.

