

ANNA ZORINA GALLERY

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— The Baltimore Sun

At the Galleries Spring 2017 by Karen Wilkin



John Bradford. Hudson River Drawing Class, 2016. Acrylic and Oil on Canvas, 48" x 60".
Courtesy of Bowery Gallery.

At the Bowery Gallery, John Bradford's "Over again After All: Recent Paintings" presented a group of his oddball mythological and biblical narratives, and some riffs on the history of art. (N.B. The typographic eccentricity of the title is the artist's. And he's no relation to Katherine, as far as I know.) The title refers to Bradford's extremely free interpretation of Paul Cézanne's famous observation that it was necessary "to do Poussin over entirely from nature," although Nicolas Poussin was not the only artist invoked by Bradford's quirky disquisitions on the past. With bold, economical strokes and a subdued palette that suggested hazy light, he took as his points of departure themes from Cézanne himself, Jean-Antoine Watteau, Edouard Manet, the American naïf painter Edward Hicks, and the nineteenth-century Hudson River school in general, with overtones of Jean-Baptiste-Camille Corot and Claude Lorrain, among others. Sometimes, Bradford's agile, schematically suggested protagonists enacted obscure biblical and mythological stories against recognizable Hudson River landscapes. Yet even though we constantly caught echoes from the history of both old master and modernist art, there was nothing literal about Bradford's allusions. His recent paintings were about other art, with the history of art treated as a source, in place of unmediated nature or direct experience. But the result was neither quotation, appropriation, nor pastiche; nor were the paintings ironic or nostalgic. Rather, they were smart reinventions, simultaneously witty, deeply felt, and completely of the moment.

Bradford's figures bent, reached, and gestured like modern dancers determined not to be conventionally graceful, but their angular postures and their relationships across the canvas seemed thoroughly informed by the past—the way even the most radical of George Balanchine's ballets were informed by what he always called "Petipa's technique." The sheer oddness of Bradford's work was extremely appealing. Witness the wacky charm of works such as *Birth of Dionysus*, 2016, near what seemed to be a rural swimming hole, or *Hudson River Drawing Class*, 2016, with a histrionically posed model and a gang of artists at their easels, on either side of a famous view of the river, framed by tall trees. I wasn't wholly convinced by the way Bradford sometimes scratched accents and counter rhythms into the surface or built up textures. His loopy imagery and seemingly "artless" paint-handling seemed sufficient. But he won me over anyway.