

PETER BRADLEY: THE KINGDOM HAS COME LAFAYETTE COLLEGE, EASTON, PA

PETER BRADLEY AT CLOSE RANGE

by Lee Klein

Peter Bradley has created a body of work including both sculpture and painting that reaches across four decades and around the world. From his earliest work in the 1960s after completing his formal art education at Society of Arts and Crafts in Detroit and Yale University to today, the major elements have been vibrant color and definition of space. His determination to distinguish himself from such contemporaries as Jules Olitski, Larry Poons, and Richard Pousette-Dart is clear.

Bradley's focus remained on sculpture through the 1980s and 1990s. He was artist-in-residence at Syracuse University in New York and guest artist at the Emma Lake Workshop, Saskatoon, Canada, organized by Sir Anthony Caro. In recent years he has focused again on painting. In these new pieces, Bradley uses molding paste, gel, and occasional bits of vegetation combined with a widely raging but keenly chosen set of colors. This exhibit includes a selection of new paintings and one sculpture.

Two paintings discussed here—*Broughtonia Sanguinea* (2002) and *Monks Hood* (2002)—as well as many of his recent sculptures are derived from parts of flowers enlarged or overlaid; thus, bestowing upon them a possible link to pop images of enlarged details of objects or to the macroscopic views that create abstract perspective in Georgia O'Keefe's flower paintings.

In *Broughtonia Sanguinea* it is as if a large, orange-red tongue was lapped over the green lily pads in a late Claude Monet painting of his pond at Giverny. The painting begins to resemble an episode from a previous moment in Western painting—here is a Monet at Giverny and now the artist feels it could use something extra, like fire. I first saw *Monks Hood* in an exhibit of abstract paintings hanging at an angle like a diamond. I was astounded by the mellifluous way that the colors worked in this format. Then, much to my surprise when I saw it recently at Tribes Gallery, I found out that it should be displayed as a square. Seeing the painting at its correct angle, I had to revise my initial impression of this depiction of the monkshood flower.

Monks Hood is moody and atmospheric; oceanic by night, and noirish by day. It is filmic in its close chromatic range of black with pink and gray. The looming hood reminiscent of the form of the flower from which the painting takes its name, is dark stained canvas that suggests an overcast sky. Beneath this "sky," a turbulent ocean seemingly disappears over the edge. The sea has its belly full with fire in a lightning storm. The horizon line gives the appearance of a flat earth here seafaring vessels may drop off. Finally, while playing this conversation optically, the flower's outer edge could be seen as the curve of the planet.

The brushstrokes are ironic as the materials is not even paint. molding paste swells in a shore-less sea. Rolls of paste appear to momentarily echo David Reed's painterly imitation of frozen animation cells and here marry together the brushstroke with suggestions of cinematic lushness. Though Reed's work owes a more obvious debt to pop artists such as Victor Vasarely, Bradley finds this accidental association through the creation of sculptural tension in his work, somehow conjuring a storm on canvas.

In employing the stain technique of Helen Frankenthaler, Bradley's sky opens up where the

riptide carries forth jet spray and accidents of oceanic fury. The effect is similar to that which I described in an essay about Frankenthaler's recent exhibition of watercolors at Knoedler Gallery, New York, N.Y.: "Frankenthaler seemingly painted as if depth charges in to chroma in literally pushing the single hue she has chosen out as both the sea and sky until it is interrupted by only the slightest further presence of another color with a small stroke of silver or purple against the volumetric field of gray or yellow within red" An echo of latter day J.M.W. Turner resounds through Frankenthaler's right color range and Bradley's *Monks Hood*. Indeed the black and white with purple and a pinkish, muted crimson of Bradley's canvas reminds one of a television screen displaying colorized black-and-white.

The issues of white in *Monks Hood* are played out once more in Bradley's sculpture, *Loxodonta Africana* (1985, African elephant) which becomes a contemporary rendition of the Hellenistic Greek statue, *Nike of Samothrace* (ca. 200 B.C.E., Musee du Louvre Paris), a winged victory. Bradley's work is constructed of steel, made supple by the sculptor. The tubing suggests receding shoulders that form suspension arcs like the bamboo pole employed by a water carrier.

Where does Bradley's winged victory come from? Perhaps the source is his self-proclaimed love for automobiles married to his love for the female form in the pose of an ancient goddess or inspiration derived from the hood ornament of a Rolls-Royce "Silver Shadow"? Could the headlessness of *Nike of Samothrace* be correlate with the abstract body language of Bradley's sculpture in which a volume is torn out of the midsection? Is this an allegorical, emotional gut-wrenching turn?

Loxodonta Africana is reminiscent of some of Sir Anthony Caro's earlier work, most famously *Prairie*, offering an articulation of space in a recasting of a previous conscious experience. The white in the sculpture like the molding paste loosely applied within movements of *Monks Hood*, reads similarly—the center of something torn out—though to accomplish different results. Bradley's technique of rolling material—whether steel or molding paste—is apparent in this sculpture as well as J.M.W. Turner in *Cinematic Redux II* (2002).