

HYPERALLERGIC

Ellen Berkenblit's Outcasts, Animals, and Body Parts

Berkenblit's mastery is the visual equivalent of someone who can write fluently in three different languages.

by **John Yau** on September 23, 2018



Ellen Berkenblit, *The Clock Unlocked*, installation view (all images courtesy Anton Kern Gallery)

Ellen Berkenblit has mastered something that very few artists working in a cartoony manner are able to achieve: she has developed at least three immediately recognizable visual languages or sets of motifs. Berkenblit's mastery is the visual equivalent of someone who can write fluently in three different languages: Finnish, Portuguese, and Greek, for example.

Berkenblit's first language consists of sharply angled, geometric forms, often concluding in the outline of a pointy nosed witch with long eyelashes but no eyes. Her mouth is usually open, as if she saying something — whispering or yelling — that we cannot understand.

Berkenblit's second signature language consists of sinuous contours, which she uses to depict a young woman with large circular button eyes and a protruding snub nose that might have a second life as a baby pacifier or butt plug.

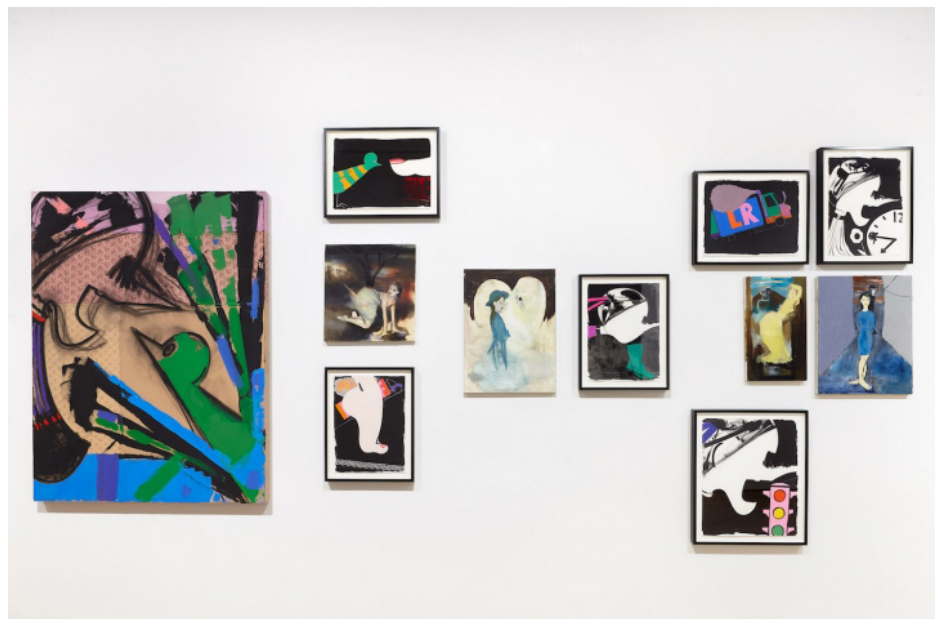
Both of these female figures — one a harridan and the other an ignored wallflower — are seen in profile, most often facing from left to right. Like silhouettes, they inhabit a domain that is parallel to ours and completely cut off from it.



Ellen Berkenblit, *The Clock Unlocked*, installation view.

I think of the two women as the artist's alter egos. They are paired with various animals (wild and domestic felines, horses, birds, leopards, tigers, polar bears, owls, snakes and bats), which I think of as the women's familiars. Often, the woman and an animal are the sole denizens of a world isolated from the rest of humanity. The pairing recalls the lore surrounding witchcraft and women isolated from mainstream society. Standing apart from the first two realms is Berkenblit's third language, which consists of cropped close-ups of a hand with painted fingernails, a single foot with painted toenails, or a nude whose head and feet have been cropped. There is something uncanny about these close-up views.

These motifs and much else can be found in *Ellen Berkenblit: The Clock Unlocked* at Anton Kern Gallery (September 12 – October 20, 2018), a survey exhibition of more than 70 works covering a span of more than 40 years. The earliest, "Untitled" (1970), is a pencil drawing of a stringy-haired profile with a pointy nose and cleft chin. Done when the artist was twelve, it augurs her interest in women that don't fit into society or fulfill its ideals of beauty. The most recent is "Sunshine" (2018), a painting done in oil, paint stick, and charcoal,



Ellen Berkenblit, *The Clock Unlocked*, installation view.

which is 7 feet high and over 16 feet in length and the artist's largest to date.

Berkenblit walks an interesting tightrope. Her work, which begins in medias res, manages to magically stay in the present tense. We cannot really figure what preceded the moment we are viewing, or decide what will follow. She has never seemed particularly interested in hot button issues. She does not depict meetings between a human and an animal as a power struggle.

"Untitled" (2018), a recent graphite and gouache depicts an index finger with a bright red fingernail extending in from the work's right edge and a green bird adorned with three orange bands extending in from the left. I was reminded of lines from the Roman poet Catullus's "Carmen 2," a lyric about a young woman and her pet sparrow: "[...] she is accustomed to give her index finger/and to provoke sharp bites.



Ellen Berkenblit, *The Clock Unlocked*, installation view.

Even Berkenblit's most pared-down works remain remarkably open-ended. What are we to make of a pointy-nosed witch looking at a clock, her mouth wide open, in "Untitled" (2016)? What story can accompany the scene in the painting, "Untitled" (ca. 1993), where a young woman in a gauzy blue gown is crawling on her hands and knees, while a bat hovers in the background, tugging at the hem? What about the mixed media, "Woman Lying Under Tree with Bear (Blue and Black)" (2000)? The woman is lying on her back, relaxing, one leg over the other, while a bear has ambled up to her. The calmness of both figures, almost as if they are oblivious of the other, is enchanting.

In these and many of the other works in the show, Berkenblit juxtaposes two motifs. Their meeting is apt to bring to mind Comte de Lautréamont's famed declaration: "As beautiful as the chance encounter of a sewing machine and an umbrella on an operating table." This statement, which was foundational to the Surrealists and Andre Breton, is given new life by Berkenblit. As the statement suggests, the meeting must be of two ordinary things that inhabit different realities.

Often set against a black ground — which can be read as a netherworld — Berkenblit has an uncanny knack for inventing motifs that are simultaneously ordinary and strange. This is particularly true of her assembly of females and female body parts. The things they encounter include animals, other body parts, and different kinds of box trucks, which are emblazoned with bold lettering on their sides. The letters never spell out words, so we are left appreciating their geometric verticals, horizontals, and diagonals.

Anton Kern Gallery 16 East 55th Street New York, NY 10022 tel 212.367.9663 fax 212.367.8135 antonkerngallery.com

Berkenblit juices up these encounters with a palette that seems to have been inspired by German Expressionism, particularly the moody colors of Ernst Ludwig Kirchner. In addition to her liberal use of black, Berkenblit likes to employ saturated hues of violet, red, blue, and green, and yellow. Pink and orange and coppery brown are likely to show up. Whether she is working in a sketchbook or on a large painting, it is clear that Berkenblit loves to draw. She prefers materials she can apply directly to a surface, rather than develop a work in stages: oil, gouache, paint stick, charcoal, and graphite.

The works often combine representational signs (snub-nosed girl and cropped nude in profile) and abstract passages (a flurry of marks or a striped band), which pushes us to read (interpret) them all. As her youthful pencil drawing of a stringy-haired woman and her confident contour drawing of a pony,” Untitled” (1980), suggest, Berkenblit’s career is rooted in her early adolescent fantasy life, and yet something remarkable happened — her work never becomes cloying, sentimental, or sweet.



Ellen Berkenblit, “Sunshine” (2018), oil, paintstick, and charcoal on canvas, 84 x 200 inches

Rather, it gets tougher and bolder, culminating in the large horizontal painting, “Sunshine” (2018), which depicts a giant, snarling leopard walking up a nighttime city street, with a row of trucks in the middle-ground.

The radical shifts in scale from the deep purple traffic light punctuated by red, yellow, and green circles, to the short striped bands (white bordered by pink) floating against the black ground, to the scrawled flurry of marks (the same colors as the yellow and black leopard) floating in the upper left corner of this painting, evoke a dream world in which everything is both vividly real and a mysterious sign that we may never fully comprehend.

Is the leopard the artist’s alter ego? The fact that we can see traces of the letters of her name — E’s and L’s — scribbled in the turbulent yellow cloud, invites us to read a painting that eludes understanding. I find that seamless meeting of legibility and illegibility immensely refreshing.

Ellen Berkenblit: *The Clock Unlocked* continues at Anton Kern Gallery (16 East 55th Street, Midtown, Manhattan) through October 20.