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CONVERSATIONS

Eavesdropping on the Whole World: Ellen Berkenblit

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Ellen Berkenblit in conversation with Harry Darrell.

In Ellen Berkenblit's body of work featured at Anton Kern Gallery, we recognize familiar elements from ordinary daily life caught in a state of transmutation: a recurring silhouette of a woman turned sideways, a horse, glasses containing cocktails of various colors. Here we take some time with the artist to talk about the show.

Harry Darrell: Tell me something about the technique(s) you used for the works presented at Anton Kern.

Ellen Berkenblit: Some of the paintings are done in the traditional, time-honored technique of oil paint on oil-primed linen. The rest are done with oil paint and charcoal on small pieces of calico fabric that I sewed together into large, free-form quilts that are then stretched onto aluminum stretchers. I've been sewing and painting my whole life. Sewing and painting are my two "things," but painting on calico that I sew occurred to me only recently. This is my first time showing works like these.

HD: What is the story behind the woman's silhouette? Have you come to conceptualize this recurring figure as a character with distinctive psychological and physiological aspects? Do they, or will they, change over time?

EB: The recurring silhouette is based on a personal calligraphy that very naturally comes from my hand—like handwriting. And, like signing my name, it has changed and I'm sure will continue to change.



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Ellen Berkenblit *Lilac*, 2016

Courtesy Anton Kern Gallery, New York / © Ellen Berkenblit Photo: Object Studies

HD: Your paintings seem to depict close-ups, details, or forms that are intuitively recognizable (a hand, a flower, a horse, an umbrella), but that seem to be metamorphosing into something else. Do you seek this effect deliberately?

EB: I'm more of a stream-of-consciousness observer, and not very deliberate at all. The images that end up in my paintings arise from physicality, using materials, mixing color, and a mental and gut response to those fundamentals. The objects hang onto their recognizable forms by a thread.

HD: How do you go about choosing subjects?

EB: I choose material, line, and color first, and then images emerge. To me, the image is not the focus of the painting as I make it. And there is certainly no narrative. All interpretations are welcome, valid. And they can change on any given day for me and for the viewer. During the process of making a painting, which is over a period of several weeks and sometimes up to several months, images come and go, I rotate the canvas, riff on what is emerging. I might start with a profile of a woman and end up with a tiger.

HD: A term that recurs in reviews of your work is "feminine." Would you agree that you are interested in elements that are intrinsically feminine? What do you take this to mean?

EB: I don't know if I am interested in elements that are intrinsically feminine, but I *am* intrinsically feminine, as it is my identity, and thus it certainly informs my work on a deep level. So my work is feminine. That said, "feminine" is not the only adjective, not the only element of my identity, that goes into my work. I'm an Ashkenazi Jew, I live in New York, I'm the daughter of a chemist/photographer and a schoolteacher, et cetera. These are some additional pieces of my identity that inform my work.

HD: What is keeping you interested right now, apart from art?

EB: Marcel Proust's *In Search of Lost Time* (1913). It's like eavesdropping on the whole world in slow motion with a magnifying glass.