

The New York Times

Ellen Berkenblit

*Anton Kern Gallery
558 Broadway,
near Prince Street
SoHo
Through July 29*

Despite their ostensible sweetness, Ellen Berkenblit's paintings of a wistful young woman and her sympathetic animal companions want to cover a lot of bases. Their mysterious backgrounds of soft blurry blots and strokes of color manifest a loosely expressionistic abstraction; the palette of dark reds, blues and greens seems deliberately restricted and therefore Conceptual, but also a trifle foreboding, since it evokes a forest suitable for fairy tales.

Occupying these settings are a cast of characters and props drawn with a deftness and a consistency that would do Disney proud. The young woman might be Cinderella on a rare day off, although occasionally she picks up a paint brush, which suggests a self-portrait. And after a while you begin to appreciate how deliberately everything is rendered, the play of drawing against painting, the occasional use of stencils, the silhouetting of figures. The clan of irresistible kittens, tigers, bears and horses that commune with this woman also appear on their own, suggesting a young girl's stuffed animals come to life as well as escapees from the world of Pooh. But they often walk upright and are endowed with human consciousness, as in the young lion in the painting titled "Goethe as a Youth."

There's a lot going on here that can't be pinned down, which is fine. Less fine is an element of blandness or preciousness. With so many artists trolling the waters where the currents of high and low, abstraction and representation, consciousness and escapism overlap, Ms. Berkenblit's work may need a little more pace and excitement to hold the attention.

ROBERTA SMITH