

ARTFORUM

ELLEN BERKENBLIT

ANTON KERN GALLERY

Drawings seem to pour out of Ellen Berkenblit like daydreams. That sense of flow comes not just from her prolific, almost diaristic production of small works on paper (as well as paintings, which are of course more elaborate) but also from the quality of her line, which is all fluidity. Berkenblit's draftsmanship can be a shade too winsome, but its charm is redeemed by her curious lack of design on the viewer: She seems interested in beguiling mainly herself.

A lithe, otherworldly young woman features in almost all the drawings and paintings here, "woman" being the only designation she receives in the descriptive deadpan of Berkenblit's titles (a typical one is *Woman Under Tree, Bear with Whiskers*, but my favorite is *Woman with Eye Infection*). While this recurring figure doesn't exactly look like the artist—who lacks that Pinocchio nose, for one thing—she's obviously a sort of alter ego. Oddly, the woman is almost always shown looking off to the right, even when walking to the left, and only one eye is ever visible. Her feet and hands are too big for the rest of her. She would appear to be some sort of benign and indolent witch, perhaps dreamed up by Charles Addams and Walt Disney in a nonce collaboration with some additional input from Elzie Segar, creator of the immortal Olive Oyl. Her familiars are cats, horses, bears, birds—never humans—and all seem to be emanations of herself rather than independent beings.

There is minimal scene setting in the drawings. A bit of brown wash equals the earth, a few jagged lines conjure a tree, three steps leading to a field of splotches are the entrance to a kind of castle. Apparently this is the witchery of drawing: the ability to invoke a world out of some traces no more substantial than cobwebs. Berkenblit's paintings, though, are something else altogether. There the woman and her totemic companions become lost in a dense underbrush of color. Where the drawings are serene in their odd synthesis of the accessible-bordering-on-naive and the blithely incommunicative, the paintings are interestingly conflicted, with the somnambulist, cartoonlike figures fading anxiously in and out of jumbled patches of angular yet effusive brushwork. Just occasionally, Berkenblit's contradictory figurative and abstract impulses seem to come to some kind of *modus vivendi*. In *Woman Painting*, 2000, for instance, the depicted artist wields nothing so mundane as a brush; instead, her hand seems to be spinning a spiderweb that in turn somehow becomes the landscape in which we find her.

Berkenblit's art is introspective, a bit self-indulgent, and more complicated than it might want to let on. Its cartoonishness is not Pop, and its abstraction is not expressionist. We're all used to the idea that painting and drawing conjure a private world, but Berkenblit takes the idea more seriously than most. This work is so socially irresponsible that it's not even concerned to comment on itself as such. Berkenblit's continual mulling over the same few states of reverie and languor doesn't feel obsessive, but rather inexplicably reasonable, like events in a dream. Walking out of the gallery, as if waking from deep sleep, you know you've experienced something. You're just not sure what.

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