

# The New York Times

## ART IN REVIEW

### **Ellen Berkenblit**

*Anton Kern Gallery  
532 West 20th Street, Chelsea  
Through Oct. 4*

The gifted artist Ellen Berkenblit continues to draw and paint the same subjects: cartoonish lions, bears, mice and other animals, along with a doe-eyed, long-nosed, brown-haired girl. The images are dreamy, half-formed, inexplicit. They slip back and forth between figuration and abstraction. The touch is lyrical and reserved, the mood wary and almost sinister.

Now, in addition to drawing, Ms. Berkenblit is spray-painting perforated metal panels of different rectangular shapes. She combines and overlaps the panels — some works involve two panels, others three, four or five — so that the paintings become like gridded reliefs, colored sculptural objects of geometric variety that you both see and see through. The effect is illusionary, as if the images were somehow painted behind the panels rather than on them, at the same time that the images seem to float in midair. Only from several feet away can you even make out figures, which dissolve when you get close up.

Sigmar Polke — both his impish drawings and his heterodox materials — comes to mind, no less than the obvious source, graffiti art. In Mr. Polke's work, everything is a feverish dream, and painting's conventional techniques are constantly being rudely undermined only to reaffirm the medium's enduring cogency. I have no idea if Ms. Berkenblit has Mr. Polke particularly in mind, but having come out of the East Village and its graffiti heyday in the 1980's, she seems to be stretching out, or perhaps she feels some pressure to make bigger works with a harder, bolder edge — aspiring to something like Mr. Polke's offbeat physical pitch, to complement her winsomeness. She is a natural intimist of small scale. The results here remain essentially ethereal and private in spirit, not tough, but clever and strange.

MICHAEL KIMMELMAN