

on the cover

BOMB



THIS PAGE, LEFT: DIGGING THE SUBWAY TUNNEL, 2006, OIL AND CHARCOAL ON LINEN, 36 x 24"; PHOTO: STEVEN WILLIAMS.
TOP: NEXTDOOR NEIGHBORS, 1991, OIL ON CANVAS, 20 x 30"; PHOTO: ADAM REICH.
BOTTOM: CHANTILLY STOP SIGNS, 2004, OIL ON LINEN, 42 x 38"; PHOTO: ADAM REICH.

Ellen Berkenblit by Amy Sillman

Standing in Ellen Berkenblit's studio, I had one of those moments of trippy intensity where the veil is ripped away. We were surrounded by the friendly chaos of her paintings, and we were talking about the concept of "knowing." Ellen turned to me and said, "But all of life is a Freudian slip, because how could you ever know what you are doing?" We looked at each other and laughed out loud, as though we had simultaneously inhaled a drug, suddenly feeling how absurd, how fraught and ridiculous "knowing" is. Berkenblit's

paintings offer many such eccentric moments of release, of delirium, of knowing not-knowing. Her work vibrates with epistemological tension.

And when I say tension, I mean it both ways—psychologically and linguistically. These pictures are tense with apprehension, and they are also tales told in a scrambled tense, the past-future-conditional-progressive. Meanwhile, the protagonists, or familiars, of Berkenblit's drawings and paintings—girl, cat, bat, donkey, pony, owl—appear repeatedly in

her work, ballast that holds down her illogical poetics of time and space.

One of Berkenblit's recurring figures is a girl in profile. For decades now, she has been coming through the pictures, moving one direction while looking off in the other. This girl is the incarnation of seeing and feeling, with big saucer eyes, and fat hands that hang in front of her like fleshy tools poised to grasp. She too is tense with a cluster of affect: anxiety, amusement, desire, shame, wonder. Her mouth is an astonished O and her eyebrows are tilted

THIS PAGE, LEFT: CZECHOSLOVAKIAN ZOO, 2006, OIL AND CHARCOAL ON LINEN, 74 x 54"; PHOTO: STEVEN WILLIAMS.
TOP: IGOR, BLACKY AND MIKE, 2001, OIL AND CHARCOAL ON LINEN, 38 x 31"; PHOTO: ADAM REICH.
BOTTOM: CZECHOSLOVAKIAN ZOO, 2006, OIL AND CHARCOAL ON LINEN, 74 x 54"; PHOTO: STEVEN WILLIAMS.
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in uncertainty. She sees and feels something off the edge—that is not pictured, perhaps something unsayable; you sense the proximity of trauma, or spooks.

However anxious the world outside the paintings may be, the characters that exist within them are outlined with the cheerful economy of '60s cartoons. We recognize them in a quick blast: girl, pony, bat. Then, Cheshire Cat-fashion, clear-cut signification fades. Neither representations nor simulacra, these

figures are displacements, emptied presences that allow something else to pour out: grief, ruins, memories, stories from old worlds. . . .

Berkenblit reimagines these worlds as spaces of constant interruption and confusion. Her characters exist within an embrace of off-register painting gestures: blotches, patches, scumbles, wipe-outs. Positive and negative spaces interlap. Colors puff up, then go slack. Shapes spill inside other shapes and obscure them. Background vaporizes into foreground.

Center spills against outline; inside destabilizes outside; past folds into future. This world issues from a place where memory and forgetting have taken hold of the body, a stuttering body that repeats and fractures. This is the beat of Berkenblit's paintings, the syncopation of not-knowing, knowing, not-knowing.

Amy Sillman is a painter who lives and works in Brooklyn.