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Doing the Loop-de-Loop: The latest surprise from Ellen Berkenblit

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Ellen Berkenblit at Anton Kern Gallery

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Ellen Berkenblit has been confounding expectations since her first solo show in 1984, a trend that happily extends to her current exhibition. Her dissonant, emotionally charged palette, with dark colors that would be at home in an Ernst Kirchner, is pushed to extremes in 20 new paintings filling Anton Kern's cavernous space. And intense palette is just an opening salvo, for while riffing on her established lexicon of female profiles (with a high-heeled leg or two thrown into the mix), Berkenblit manages to flip the traditional figure/ground relationship literally on its head.



Ellen Berkenblit, *Broken Pane of Frosted Glass*, 2012. Oil and charcoal on linen, 94 x 76 1/4 inches. Courtesy Anton Kern Gallery, New York

One is immediately aware that there is something especially unsettling going on here. The regular heroine of her past work – she of the bobbed nose, Betty Boop eyes, and shy demeanor – has been replaced. In her stead is a pointy-nosed, gap-toothed, grinning lass, her flying blond hair – pink ribbon notwithstanding – displaying an undeniably greenish tinge. Witch imagery, invoking tangential thoughts of spells, altered states, and female power, is alluded to but ultimately not insisted upon.

The main character's changed appearance, while noteworthy, is not disturbing. Rather, it is her now extremely casual relationship with gravity. Whereas previously Berkenblit's figures existed, for the most part, in a world that recognized the existence of gravity and corresponded to traditional notions of top and bottom, her new heroine might enter the paintings from any angle: upper right or left or even, à la Georg Baselitz, from the top. Looking at one particular installation of three larger paintings, it is hard not to resist seeing her blond protagonist doing a full loop-de-loop.

This is about more than figures in flight. There is a conceptual inversion at play, recalling for this reviewer Shusaku Arakawa's 1970s series of paintings combining text with colors in which legibility was undermined by the image's visual logic. In a similar way, looking at Berkenblit's *Broken Pane of Frosted Glass*, 2012, there is a natural urge to isolate, identify, and create a narrative from the various elements: face, quarter moons, stars, leg, high-heel. But, as with the Arakawa's, the colors continually take precedent and pull the viewer's eye contrary to representational logic. The dichotomy created between figuration and abstraction simply refuses to coalesce, a frisson that supercharges the surface: it is not just the heroine of the paintings doing back-flips, but the entire figure-ground relationship.

Berkenblit has never shied away from experimentation and risk in her work. In one past series she painted on metal grates (a series of works that looks increasingly better in retrospect) and she has worked exclusively in black and white for an entire exhibition. This latest body of work consolidates a decade of her thinking about color, image, narration, and abstraction, the resulting optical turmoil leading to visual pleasures exciting and wild.