

Katherine Bernhardt, "Tombouctou 52 Jours"

★★★★★

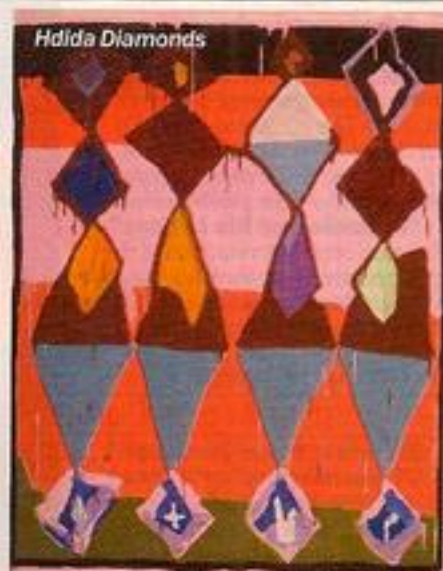
Canada, through May 23 (see Lower East Side)

Katherine Bernhardt's latest show, inspired by a visit to Morocco, bounds with emphatic energy, pizzazz and chirpy colors. It pops. Bernhardt has channeled her infatuation with the country not only into new canvases, but directly onto the walls, which she covers with a pattern of painterly palm fronds and large, abbreviated, brushstrokes. The latter is, perhaps, an attempt to re-create the natural habitat of the North African rug motifs that serve as the basis for her first forays into abstraction.

Cinching the whole together is the artist's endearingly slipshod yet confident approach to painting.

Rather than immaculately copying the carpet designs, Bernhardt treats them with the insouciance of a restless child working as fast and as impulsively as possible. The outcome looks as unbridled and lively as the delivery. Three paintings in the back room, for instance, titled *Algerian Tribal Weaving Painting*, *Hdida Diamonds and Nomads* and *Tents in the Atlas Mountains*, make for a fantastic sequence.

The show is punctuated with her signature portraits of furiously drawn women in striking poses; it's



good to see that Bernhardt hasn't abandoned them. She's clever enough to contextualize some—but not all—within her theme. *Jumpsuit* retains the bravura of the artist's slashing facial and body contours, while bangles and the African print of the eponymous garment add a fitting, if obvious, ethnic twist. The subject is unequivocally confident in her femininity, cultural identity and traffic-stopping red lipstick.

Bernhardt embodies directness. While her lack of restraint could be criticized, it keeps her from overthinking an idea or gesture, lending her work a refreshing and attractive immediacy.

—Nana Asfour