

CULTURED

ISLAND LIVING

Q&A | SEP 2015 | BY LAUREN PELLERANO GOMEZ



Katherine Bernhardt's "Jungle Snack", 2015

Katherine Bernhardt, whose *FRUIT SALAD*—a mural covering the exterior of Venus Over Los Angeles in downtown L.A led to a stream of selfies this summer—is back with a new series of still-life paintings installed at Venus Over Manhattan. The exhibition, “Pablo and Efrain,” is named after twin artists Bernhardt met during a recent residency in Puerto Rico. Quotidian objects, such as headphones, cigarettes, sharpies and keyboards, are electrified by a palette spanning the Pantone-wheel. Here, we trace the path that landed her here.

I remember seeing your work at a show in New York years ago, with ‘downtown fashion girls’ taking over the canvases, boldly declaring their presence. Since then, you’ve explored Moroccan patterns and a graffiti-style approach to painting. Tell us about this visual trajectory.

My work is always a response to my life and what I'm interested in at the time. I painted Moroccan rugs because I had just returned from Morocco and was obsessed with Moroccan rugs. Now I paint Puerto Rico-themed things because I'm currently obsessed with Puerto Rico and the idea of moving there and living there full time. I'm actually in Puerto Rico right now. I love the hot weather, being surrounded by lush plants and melting from sweat. It feels good. I also like to see the color of fruit here. All of the colors look brighter here in the Caribbean light.

Your *Fruit Salad* mural, which went up in Los Angeles this summer, was inspired by your time in Puerto Rico. What first brought you to the island?

I first came to Puerto Rico approximately 10 years ago to do a show with Galleria Commercial. I was down here for a few days. One night, I went out to take a bioluminescence bay tour and happened to see the countryside here at a glance. When I saw the beauty there I knew I had to come back and see more of this country.

While your exploration of shapes and forms through heavy brushstrokes remains consistent, your color palette seems to have significantly evolved over the years. Would you agree, and if so, what would you cite as the reason for this transition?

For me, the colors have changed because sure, when you paint a person, you are painting skin colors. And when you paint the colorful Caribbean, you will have lots of bright colors. Painting tropical ideas lets me use bright colors. I've always been interested in color.

What attracts you to Puerto Rico?

I love Puerto Rico and feel a severe attachment to it. When I'm in New York, I just want to come back here. It's more of a feeling of loving this place. When I leave, I cry.

Does your hometown of St. Louis, Missouri ever find its way into your work?

I also paint in St. Louis, in my parents' patio outside during the summer. I love working outside with the plants. In winter there I work on their dining room table and make watercolors. I like working outside of my studio...it's very freeing.

What draws you to painting as your primary medium?

I love paint. I love the fluidity of it. I like to make 2-D flat paintings that hang on walls. I like colors and mixing and matching them. That's why I like Old San Juan—the colors all over, and the color combinations on the houses. I like hiking through the streets here and being *in* the color. La Perla (a neighborhood next to OSJ) is even more intense . I love to be overwhelmed by color. And Rufino Tamayo's painting called *Sandias* from 1968 is an example of what I'm talking about.



Your exhibition at Venus Over Manhattan is titled “Pablo & Efrain.” Where does the exhibition’s title derive from?

Pablo Del Hierro and Efrain Del Hierro are twins who are Puerto Rican, who are part of the performance artist collective Poncili Creacion. I met them here during my winter residency last year. We both work with Roberto Paradise gallery in San Juan. They are high energy and really fun and funny and smart and colorful, and beautiful. To me, they are all the things that represent Puerto Rico.

What’s the greatest thing about being an artist in New York right now?

Right now—or any time—it’s a great place to be. All the artists are here and all the collectors are here; it’s fun just to walk around SoHo and the Lower East Side. I like being around CANADA.

What’s the biggest challenge as an artist in New York right now?

Finding a studio space near Manhattan and being able to be near Manhattan. The prices in New York are outrageous. I feel really far away in my studio in Brooklyn.

Tell us about your upcoming exhibition at Carl Freedman Gallery in London. How will the content of that show differ from what you’re showing at Venus Over Manhattan’s New York location?

The show in London is more New York / London style. The show is called “Mr Coffee.” There will be lots of socks and coffee makers in the work. LOL.

After spending some time in L.A., what are your favorite art spaces?

My favorite art space in L.A. is Venus Over Los Angeles because it's so huge. I've never seen anything like it. I like to visit Venice Beach and the canals. Also the Getty museum on the Pacific Coast Highway is amazing. I love the Huntington Gardens desert area.