

Patterns of consumption

Interview by Alex Rayner

On the eve of her new London exhibition, we speak to the American painter Katherine Bernhardt about Moroccan carpets, Kate Moss and coffee

You can spot the Pop Art influences in Katherine Bernhardt's paintings pretty easily. She first found fame seven or eight years ago with her angular, slapdash depictions of fashion models, and, more recently began filling her canvases featuring a wider range of objects, from hammerhead sharks through to headphones, Chapsticks, Swatch watches and basketballs. Yet, unlike, Warhol, there's no cool comment on the reproducibility of images here, or knowing exaltation of the beauty in commerce in her work.

The 40-year-old artist's free, fast style of painting brings to mind the brushwork of German Abstract- and Neo-Expressionism. However, Bernhardt dodges the sombre angst often dwelt on by those predecessors.

Her repeated motifs, as she explains below, draw from the anti-minimalist, worldly, vernacular artistry of the late-20th century Pattern and Decoration movement, which sought to undermine the solemn, white males who once dominated fine art. Only, Bernhardt's paintings also look too jolly, lascivious and downright good to be tied up with these slightly outdated concerns.

The artist was born in Missouri, married a Moroccan man whom she met on a rug-buying trip to Essauira, and now lives in New York, painting pictures that appear to cycle through different enthusiasms, be they tropical fruit, cigarettes or consumer durables. In this way she seems to capture all the bright, silly, covetable goods we end up wanting these days, when no overarching art movement holds sway, and instead, an unending stream of goods and opportunities passes before our eyes.

Alex Rayner: *Could you tell us about Mr Coffee?*

Katherine Bernhardt: Mr Coffee is an amazing machine that brews my coffee every morning.

AR: *Do you tend to like or dislike the objects you paint?*

KB: I tend to like them. I don't think I would paint something I didn't like. I would have no interest in it at all.

AR: *In the past you have referenced consumerist items like Swatch watches and burgers, as well as found objects from other cultures, like north African rugs. Do these objects serve an intellectual purpose within your work, or are they primarily items that you have reacted to on a more instinctive or aesthetic level?*

KB: Both. The items represent American culture, pop culture, and relate to Andy Warhol and Philip Guston and Henri Matisse in the way that they are painted. The items are also shapes in themselves that work as shapes of an abstract object pattern painting.

AR: *When you paint models are you working with life models or from photographs? And does it matter in terms of your relationship to the subject?*

KB: I was working from torn-out magazine photos from *Elle* and *Vogue*. I've never met any of the models. It's more about obsession, or the things that I'm obsessed with: Moroccan carpets, Kate Moss or coffee.

AR: *You've said in the past that you tend to complete a painting quite quickly. Is this still so? How do you know when one is finished?*

KB: I do work fast. It's immediate and fresh. Knowing if a painting is finished is an instinct, I guess.

AR: *Can you give us some further insight into the way you work? You've said that you paint quickly, but how about your research period? Do you research each painting specifically or do you tend to board visual references as you go along?*

KB: I hoard visual references in my head. I also take pictures of delis and posters in delis or 99-cent stores. I work spontaneously, so I just think of things I want in a painting and then do it. I draw it out first in spray paint and paint it on the floor. That way it can be very liquidy.

AR: *Do you like to hang on to your paintings for a while before they go on display? Does your view of them change over time?*

KB: It's good to be able to see your paintings for a while in the studio and also to have people see them and critique them. Some of the ones that I hate other people love; it's their favourite. Other ones that I love, people have no interest in.

AR: *Quite a few commentators describe your painting style as combining Pop Art and Expressionism – two styles that are often seen as being in opposition to one another. Is this an accurate characterisation?*

KB: Painting now can be a mix of anything and any style, but you have to make it your own somehow. I see my work more as influenced by [1970s and 80s US art movement] Pattern and Decoration, or related to Paul Gauguin or Henri Matisse.

AR: *Do you feel like you're part of any wider network, or is there any one artist at the moment whose art you feel a connection with? Isn't all art a reaction to other people's art?*

KB: It's a dialogue related to all other contemporary art and art that came before it.

AR: *Which other painters do you admire?*

KB: Matisse, Peter Doig, Chris Ofili, Laura Owens.

AR: *Other painters' work aside, what else do you find visually exciting or engaging at the moment?*

KB: Hand-painted murals and hand-painted signs.

AR: *Are there any common misunderstandings when it comes to your paintings? Or anything that is often overlooked?*

KB: Lots of people like to say, "Oh, my child could have painted that. It looks like a kid did it." These people are haters. Actually, I just make it look easy. Try making it yourself before judging. I dare you.

Katherine Bernhardt's exhibition is on from 12 October to 14 November 2015 at the Carl Freedman Gallery, 29 Charlotte Road, London EC2A 3PB carlfreedman.com



Mr. Coffee and French Fries, 2015
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