



In composing her 1995 *New Yorker* article “Orchid Fever,” Susan Orlean became infatuated with a Miami-based horticulturist named John Laroche. Eccentric in looks and behavior, Laroche cut a compelling figure on numerous levels, but Orlean’s fascination lay in his obsessive approach to his personal interests. Before flowers, Laroche had fervently invested himself in collecting rare turtles, Ice Age fossils, precious stones and tropical fish; by the end of the article, he’d moved on to web design and homemade porn. This, she marveled, was a man utterly driven by his passions, his career unfolding as a series of distinct, concentrated phases. That artist Katherine Bernhardt regularly likens herself to Laroche in interviews is fitting. Bernhardt’s work is similarly driven by a fanatic impulse: in both subject and technique, the New York-based painter is restless, translating a broad range of personal absorptions into insouciant, jubilant, highly expressive compositions.

Her first notable series is also her best known: a set of portraits depicting models torn from the pages of high-fashion glossies. Vigorously rendered in wet-on-wet acrylic, Bernhardt turns their visages into pure material, each pose reduced to jagged contours, swirling brushstrokes and thick, dripping swipes. The results are legible but abstracted, her subjects seemingly melting, crying, dissolving into paint — leading some to read the series as a hostile critique of societal beauty norms. But as is true of all her work, Bernhardt’s appropriations are based less in satire than in genuine infatuation, her treatments a matter of stylistic license. As such, the series established what would prove her central motif: the transmuting of (pop-)cultural references through playful, unprecious means.

After working this way for a few years, Bernhardt

Katherine Bernhardt (American, b. 1975) is an artist who lives and works in New York. She is represented by CANADA Gallery, New York.

Bernhardt’s work is currently shown in “Pablo and Efrain,” a solo exhibition at Venus Over Manhattan in New York from September 9 to October 24.

Christopher Schreck is an independent writer, editor, and publisher. He lives in New York.

Image: *Fruit Salad*, 2015, Courtesy of the artist and Venus Over Manhattan, New York/Los Angeles

began producing large-scale images of Swatch watches, a fashion staple of her ’80s adolescence. Characteristically rendered in hurried, slapdash washes, these works confirm Bernhardt’s approach as that of a joyful consumer, eagerly engaged with surrounding visual culture(s). During this period, she also took a fateful trip to Morocco, whose hand-woven rugs and domestic wall paintings would inspire the artist to take a new direction, incorporating their loose geometric patterns into both her canvases and, for the first time, a series of collages, merging discarded textiles with magazine ads to bold, vibrant ends.

Bernhardt’s currents series reaches a kind of middle ground, combining the models’ messiness with later abstractions. Her boldest output to date, these latest pieces feature crowded arrays of everyday items (“Doritos, Socks and Basketballs,” “Coffee, Cigarettes and Pizza”) set afloat in sketchy fields of color. Where earlier canvases seemed frantic, these works display a new-found economy: crudely rendered in acrylic and spray paint, the results fall somewhere between children’s doodles and the freehand murals and graffiti one finds outside Brooklyn bodegas. But what the works lack in finish, they make up for in panache, the results willfully slipshod, charmingly casual, knowingly provisional.

Of course, in recent years, “provisional” has taken on specific connotations when it comes to painting, denoting reluctance, anxiety, an underlying struggle with the medium. But while Bernhardt similarly denies “heroic” gestures, her work is anything but reticent; there’s a confidence in her laxity that reflects a love for both her subjects and process. Bernhardt is clearly enjoying herself in these works—and in viewing them, it’s hard not to do the same. ☺

“TRANSMUTING POP CULTURAL REFERENCES THROUGH PLAYFUL, UNPRECIOUS MEANS”