

## Katherine Bernhardt

XAVIER HUFKENS GALLERY



Katherine Bernhardt,  
*Playing Games*, 2016,  
mixed media. Installation  
view.

Katherine Bernhardt's images—of running shoes, cigarettes, and Pac-Man—are messy; her large-scale spray-paint-and-acrylic canvases feature graffiti, cartoon characters, and emoji. What makes her works more than just decorative is that they present the viewer with unsolvable visual and verbal puzzles. They achieve this semiotic ambiguity because her simple renderings of things don't always make it clear what is being represented. The ten paintings and one quilt in Bernhardt's recent exhibition, "Product Recall: New Pattern Paintings," saw the artist on familiar ground: juxtaposing imagery typical of the place where she is currently exhibiting—in this case, Belgium—with the iconography of her past appearances, such as the tropical motifs from her earlier series in Puerto Rico, mixed with less localized ones. While certain images are easy to read—bananas, Windex bottles, Lisa Simpson—others are harder to identify. In *Nutella*, 2016, for example, are those goblets of Belgian beer and waffles, or are they glasses of red wine and pieces of chocolate? The execution is loose enough that, on first glance, it remains playfully uncertain. And any of those things locate the imagery in Belgium, more or less.

The titles themselves offer no obvious clue to the paintings' meanings. *Nutella*, for example, only identifies the two jars of the nutty chocolate scattered among the many objects rendered in it. Sometimes the titles are factually incorrect: *Six Papayas*, 2016, for instance, depicts six halves only, thus three complete papayas, plus three bananas and one Nike sneaker (not a pair). And yet without the title of one of the more subdued pictures, *Five Toilet Papers*, 2015, it might be difficult to ascertain what is being represented. Again, however, the title plays with us—this time grammatically, for comedic effect. In Bernhardt's oeuvre, signs, motifs, and objects from various times and places simmer in a gumbo of global culture—tropical fruit, Smurfs, Duracell batteries, Chap Stick, Rubik's Cubes, toucans, kiwi fruit, Nikes. The juxtapositions can be amusing, but they also bring to mind Claude Lévi-Strauss's comment that in an age of monoculture, travel is no longer possible. What we have in Bernhardt's world, instead, is a series of incongruous images encountering each other as if trapped in an endless game of Pac-Man.

Much like that video game, some of her paintings have anachronistic or even nostalgic overtones. The batteries, for example, recall the 1990s, when, pre-iPod, the tracks of the New York subway system were littered with double A's, tossed off the platform after use, while Pac-Man and Rubik's Cube echo the '80s—outdated and yet appropriate avatars for the sloppy digital world we inhabit, where our contemporary symbols are now as easily recycled from previous decades. Even the shoes are difficult to date—it's hard to tell if they are current or vintage.

A large quilt, *Playing Games*, 2016, displayed in the exterior gallery windows, further complicates the tension between what her work depicts and what it means. The large work patches Dutch wax fabrics with images of President Barack Obama and small details of mosques. In this context, the accompanying figures and figments of consumer culture acquire a directly political context. The uncertainty of whether Obama's presence, sewn into the quilt repeatedly, is affirmative or critical makes the work all the more resonant, providing a sinister tone to the

lightheartedness of Bernhardt's paintings. They do not resolve into an easy statement of the iconography of our era. Instead, they present playful but perplexing riddles of migration and consumption.

—Aaron Peck