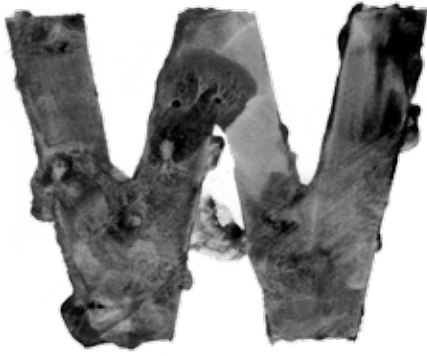


Meet
Katherine Bernhardt,
the so-called
“female bad-boy” of
contemporary art.

By
Scott Indrisek

Photographs by
Dina Litovsky





“WHEN I STARTED, I wanted to paint things that had nothing to do with each other, that made no sense,” says Katherine Bernhardt. “That was the goal: nothingness. And what were the brightest, craziest color combinations I could come up with, that would clash?”

Bernhardt—44 years old, sporting a Daisy Duck T-shirt, enormous earrings from a local fabric store, and flashy neon-pink-laced Nike Air Zoom Pegasus 35s with a floral print—is holding court in her studio, a converted auto-repair shop in the Flatbush neighborhood of Brooklyn. She pegs her personal style as “tropical, futuristic hippie,” and that’s not far off from some of the paintings she makes; the space is brimming with huge works that exude an eye-popping swagger. In one, a spray-painted Pink Panther hangs out with two high-speed bullet trains modeled on the Shinkansen that Bernhardt rode with her son during a recent trip to Japan. A wobbly painting of the infamous oversized Triple S sneaker by Balenciaga outs her as a sneakerhead. (She’s also enough of a Nike fanatic that she has her own hand-drawn swoosh tattoo.) There’s a massive pile of soft-sculpture gummy worms stacked up in one corner, leftovers from *Concrete Jungle Jungle Love*, a 2017 takeover of New York’s Lever House, for which Bernhardt created a sprawling environment. “Now that I look back at it, it was kind of too much,” she reflects. “Too much color, too much of everything...”

Bernhardt’s slight regret is amusing, given that these days she’s always putting too much of everything into her work. A typical Bernhardt might measure up to 10 feet long, its surface swimming with spray-painted oddities: hammerhead sharks, hamburgers, Windex bottles, cigarettes, watermelons, Garfields, stormtroopers, bananas. A lot of what draws her to things is simply their color: the bright bright pink of the Pink Panther; Garfield’s orange tone; the chemical blue of that Windex bottle. They’re unabashedly fun and proudly illogical, fast and silly yet executed with thoughtful, painterly chops. And in 2019, Bernhardt is at the top of her game, beloved by her fellow artists and coveted by private collectors and museums alike. Meanwhile, she’s got countless creative side hustles—selling imported Moroccan rugs, as well as a series of hand-painted, tie-dyed T-shirts ornamented with bootleg logos—all while juggling the demands of

single motherhood. (A typical weekend could include a trip to a Manhattan Lego store and a birthday party down at Coney Island.)

“I’m satisfied and yet never satisfied,” she says. “I don’t like to waste time. Life is short, so I always try to do as much as possible.”

BERNHARDT GREW UP on the outskirts of St. Louis, in a house that was filled to the brim, thanks to her mother’s hoarding tendencies, with what might be considered Bernhardt’s signature excess *stuff*. “Newspapers, ice cream molds, Scottish terrier paraphernalia,” she says, as though rattling off an inventory of one of her own paintings. “All the furniture from people’s estates that died. Just everything. I remember we had a playroom that was really full of stuff—my dad got mad, he came and *raked* it out.”

She left home to study at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, accepted with a portfolio of watercolors she’d made based on photos she took as a high school exchange student in Portugal. From there she moved to New York for the master’s program at the School of Visual Arts (SVA). Her knowledge of contemporary art, until that point, basically ended with Georgia O’Keefe, although she had been turned on to the work of Laura Owens and Mary Heilmann in Chicago. Their impact on her own future paintings makes sense: Owens is known for irreverent appropriation of pop-culture imagery, and Heilmann’s abstract paintings are explosions of bright color, rendered with a loose hand.

In New York, Bernhardt hit the Chelsea gallery scene hard and found her stride as an artist. She was a sensation before she’d even finished her degree, in 2000. Her early output included messy still lifes of common objects, as well as riffs on pop-culture touchstones like E.T. and the McDonald’s arches. Shortly after graduation, she landed a solo show at Team Gallery, home at the time to a dude-heavy roster of artists like Slater Bradley and Steven Parrino. “There was a rampant disrespect for painting going on that I really responded to,” says Team cofounder José Freire, who visited Bernhardt’s SVA studio along with his then gallery partner, Francis Ruyter. “It’s taken time for people to see that the work has this romantic, abiding *respect* for the traditions of painting—that the low-brow subject matter is not the be-all and end-all of what she’s doing.”

Bernhardt’s star was lifted further by a glowing *Village Voice* review from future Pulitzer Prize-winning critic Jerry Saltz. (“She’s a natural, even if I can’t say exactly what kind of natural that is,” he proclaimed in 2001.) At the time, Bernhardt was making drippy, purposefully inelegant images of fashion models, all based directly on photos from magazines. She painted them as if



she were a fan who simultaneously wanted to destroy her icons. Hair transformed into a tangled nest of angry brushstrokes; clothing dissolved into colorful smears and blotches. Some may have read it as a vicious attack on a superficial industry, though that was never Bernhardt’s intent. She’d cross paths with supermodels at parties or openings and excitedly ask them to take pictures with her.

“I was painting them because I loved them—I was obsessed with them,” she tells me now. “Gisele! Kate Moss!” she exclaims, with true fangirl enthusiasm, while flipping through a 2008 book on the series, *The Magnificent Excess of Snoop Dogg* (which, somewhat confusingly, does not actually contain any paintings of Snoop Dogg).

“What’s amazing about her is that she defies so many rules,” says longtime friend and fellow artist Brian Belott. Her insistence



Katherine Bernhardt at her Brooklyn studio in June 2019.

on working from photographs, for instance, was a flippant transgression. Belott was impressed by how Bernhardt turned slick fashion images into portraits akin to those of David Park or Egon Schiele. Spindly bodies, oversized heads, a sense of the human form as something strange and uncomfortable.

Bernhardt eventually left Team behind, shifting her allegiances to the CANADA gallery. The ethos at CANADA, which was founded in 1999, was fresh and fairly DIY, as all four cofounders were artists themselves. Belott was part of the broader crew showing there, as were Brendan Cass, Joe Bradley, and Josh Smith. “It was a den of like-minded artists,” Belott recalls, “who were interested in burping up objects and things, not cleaning them off, showing them for all their punky theatricality.” Despite gaining critical buzz

for her supermodel paintings, Bernhardt had never fully felt at home with Team, and CANADA was something of a revelation. “I liked the vibe and the niceness,” she says. “I fit in there—part of a family.”

When CANADA cofounders Phil Grauer and Sarah Braman first visited Bernhardt, she was working out of her bedroom in a modest apartment on 27th Street and Third Avenue in Manhattan. Braman says the visit was a mutual laugh-in; Grauer recalls “a snowdrift of paintings everywhere,” a sense of the impossible being pulled off, somehow, in such a tight space. CANADA included her in its 2005 show *New York’s Finest*, a sly flipping of the bird to MoMA PSI’s *Greater New York* survey. At this point Bernhardt was “notorious and famous, in a weird little way,” and her inclusion on the roster brought fresh attention to the gallery.

“She was a celebrity of some kind,” Grauer jokes, “compared to the losers that we were.”

Painter Wallace Whitney, another CANADA cofounder, recalls meeting Bernhardt at an opening, circa 2001, where she was sporting a Captain Morgan T-shirt that she’d shredded and ornamented with beads. “She had this enormous presence, this megawatt energy,” Whitney says, “this reputation of a sort of ‘bad girl’ painter.... There was a certain punk ethos around that, an early second-wave feminist attack on painting that was bubbling up again.”

Not everyone was sold on Bernhardt’s devil-may-care attitude toward painting’s rules, or toward the art world itself. Braman, looking back on those early days, notes a persistent prejudice that still lingers. Bernhardt was headstrong, unconcerned with playing the traditional careerist games. She painted what she felt like painting and wasn’t afraid

“I guess that’s my aesthetic,” Bernhardt says, “raw, stained, messy, using-your-hand-in-it art.”

of the occasional collaboration with brands like Chanel or Miss Sixty. “The curators could smell that on her—that her practice didn’t allow for her caring about them anointing her,” Braman says. “It felt overtly sexist.... A woman that isn’t going to need the acknowledgment of the museum class, that’s too scary. They don’t want to see that. When she was doing the model paintings, they’d use words like *thin* and *vapid* when they’re totally, intensely beautiful paintings, an intensely complex, subtle critique and translation of the American experience as a woman.”

“Someone—a dealer—told me that I’ll never make it as a female unless I make *big* paintings,” Bernhardt says today. “So I was like, ‘Okay...I’ll make big paintings!’”

BERNHARDT’S PRACTICE—and life—took a wild detour in her mid-30s, when she visited a friend in Morocco who was working with native weavers in the Valley of the Roses. She fell in love with the country’s carpets, and with Youssef Jdia, a rug seller who would eventually become her husband and the father of her child, Khalifa. (They’re now divorced; Jdia is no longer in the picture.) “I was like, ‘These rugs are awesome—how can I get all of them?’” she says. “We’d go all over—to people’s houses, out to the desert, the cave dwellers—collecting them all over.”

Back in the States, Bernhardt put her supermodels to rest and started painting large-scale loose renderings of Moroccan carpet designs, as well as making collages that incorporated actual fabrics. She began returning to Morocco periodically, starting a sideline business importing the rugs themselves, which she sells out of her studio, at pop-up shops, at the occasional art fair, and sometimes in gallery shows. Neither move was without controversy. “This kid from the Midwest who somehow winds up in North Africa and is painting these rugs—how appropriate is that?” CANADA’s Grauer says, channeling the criticism. “Katherine lifted the rugs the same way she lifted E.T. It was all part of the same stuff—the stuff outside of her body. She was not going to discriminate around those things, and she never has: ‘There’s me, and the world.’ In some ways that could be understood as insensitivity, but in another way it’s very beautifully open and democratic.”

Bernhardt’s practice has always been voracious, swallowing up objects and influences around her. Those who know her well describe her as someone who lacks the cut-throat, competitive edge so common to the art world—and yet she’s a keen study, attuned to the tactics and techniques of those around her, like fellow CANADA artists Michael Williams and Matt Connors. “She was looking

at those big, big paintings. One of the things about that group of artists is the sketch, taken to a monumental scale,” Whitney says. “Katherine was doing fast watercolors of just anything that would pop into her head—a Popsicle, a burrito, a Sharpie, a cigarette—and then somehow she was able to transpose this energy onto an 8-by-10-foot canvas.”

These so-called “pattern paintings” were a synthesis of so much that had come before, a way to mingle the logic of Moroccan carpet design with signs and symbols of her own. “These rugs had repeating elements,” Grauer says. “She was going to do that, too: Cigarettes, basketballs, or hamburgers were going to get woven and repeated and placed.” The eureka moment that further kicked off this shift was a graffiti mural Bernhardt saw in Manhattan one day. “It was a smiley face, a heart, a dollar sign, an ice cream, stuff like that, kind of random, all over the wall,” she says. “I was like, ‘I want to paint like *that*.’ So I stole that idea.” Her first version of the

concept mixed images of emoji with a few bananas. “I was scared of it,” she admits. “The colors were weird. It didn’t feel comfortable.”

Bernhardt pegs her personal style as “tropical, futuristic hippie”—just like much of her work.

And yet something about that awkward experiment stuck with her. The stylistic rebirth—in your face, heavy on the spray paint, drippy and wild—debuted at the Roberto Paradise gallery in San Juan, Puerto Rico, in 2013. Bernhardt had been traveling to the island since 1998. Intentionally or not, the paintings she showed there popped with a new, vibrant, specifically tropical energy. They were fast, silly, and joyous. Bernhardt has never been one for enigmatic or pretentious titles: Anyone visiting *Watermelon*, *Smiley Faces*, *Ice Cream*, *Popsicles*, *Avocado* and *Sun* knew exactly what they were getting. “When she was making these paintings, she started thinking less,” says Francisco Rovira Rullán, owner of Roberto Paradise. “She relaxed her brain.”

The patterns kept coming. Hamburgers, cell phones, Lisa Simpson, sharks, and cigarettes, cigarettes, cigarettes. (Don’t expect any vapes; Bernhardt still smokes old-school Newport 100s.) A painter who had made her mark with moody, expressionistic portraits of Kate Moss was now letting overstuffed tacos dance against a sunflower yellow background. The new works refused to take themselves seriously; a 2014 show at CANADA



was called *Stupid, Crazy, Ridiculous, Funny Patterns*. And although Bernhardt certainly takes the act of painting seriously, its intensity and physicality, she's a bit more elusive when it comes to making sense out of all this stuff. A further influence, she says, was contemporary Dutch wax fabrics, which similarly jumble together patterned images that have no relation to one another: the head of Barack Obama, for instance, with a punch of pencils.

"Dumb things, dumb objects," she muses in her studio. "What *is* stupid?"

IT'S TEMPTING TO connect her current faux-naive, sugar-overload style with the fact that she became a mother in 2011. Certainly the pattern paintings have a childlike energy about them, and they're littered with cartoon-character cameos. (Despite how often she returns to both the Pink Panther and Garfield, the artist stresses that she "[doesn't] even like cats." She's allergic.) If anything, Bernhardt seems to lean in to any tired, "my kid could do that" criticisms.

Her son, Khalifa, now eight, is a constant companion and an occasional collaborator, even if she tries to keep him out of the studio these days. "He trashes the place," she says. "He likes to make box forts there. He likes to squirt tons of paint out on this palette that I have and then not use it. Or paint all over the floor." When I visit, there's an array of small canvases on the floor, some of them destined for a Hamptons art fair. They're all variations on the motif of the Lacoste alligator logo. (Does she own Lacoste or Chanel items? "No. Don't care. I'd rather make fake ones.") One of the paintings is a joint effort

between her and Khalifa, a murky green fantasia that has a distinct Peter Doig vibe. It's Bernhardt's favorite of the bunch.

Later in the day, we head to Bernhardt's two-bedroom apartment in Flatbush, Brooklyn, on the edge of Prospect Park. It's a cozy nest, the floor piled with Moroccan rugs, the walls hand-painted with similar motifs. Every inch of space is crowded with art, much of it trades from friends and peers: a David Shrigley of a woman licking a frog; a Brian Belott, composed of crumpled and painted aluminum-foil balls; a glittery Chris Martin, leaning against the wall; a bulbous, wonky Katie Stout sculpture, repurposed as a toy shelf; a trio of Jason Foxes hanging in the bedroom that, she says, sometimes scare Khalifa. Near the bed slumps an enormous soft sculpture of a lighter by Al Freeman; it's paired with a similarly scaled cigarette, which Rob Pruitt made for her as a gift. While we talk in the living room, surrounded by the art of all those and so many others—Alicia Gibson, Misaki Kawai, Joanne Greenbaum—I ask her if there's a general style she responds to. Unlike so many artists, Bernhardt doesn't come with a ready-made shtick, a rote speech about what it all means; she's clearly enamored of painting, but less so of talking about painting. "I guess that's my aesthetic: raw, stained, messy, using-your-hand-in-it art," Bernhardt says. She's not a fan of "perfect, realistic cartoons" (the Chicago Imagists), but she's a sucker for the "smeared, gross" ceramics of Sterling Ruby, a favorite artist. Precious and pristine is out—she'd rather live with a piece by José Luis Vargas, who isn't afraid to let a bit of coffee spill on his canvases. Her

own work has gotten looser with time; she'll add a bit of water to freshly sprayed paint, let a Pink Panther's head melt a bit. Speed is the order of the day.

But when it comes to her own practice, Bernhardt is reserved, if not mildly uncomfortable. She seems uninterested in unpacking the hows and whys of her paintings: the meaning of an oversized *Star Wars* stormtrooper, her thoughts on Jerry Saltz dubbing her a "female bad-boy painter." It seems enough that Bernhardt has made these things, launched them out into the world, let them speak in their own self-assured, proudly doofy way. She'd rather bitch about the way crypto-bros have driven up rents in San Juan, or tell me about how obsessed she is with the emo rapper Juice WRLD (*Shout your name in hills in the valley*, goes her current favorite track, "Desire." *Whole world's gonna know you love me.*) And while she does read her own reviews, Bernhardt puts more faith in a different audience. Recently she had a solo show at upstate New York's Art Omi—Pink Panthers posing with cigarettes, Scotch-tape rolls, clusters of bananas—and she was psyched to learn that the center's youngest visitors were responding to the work. Classes were being held. A future generation was learning that art can be as weird, scuzzy, and funny as you dare it to be. "When kids like it," she says, "I know that it's good."

Over the years, Bernhardt's practice has also been driven by a series of infatuations: art crushes, style crushes. "She has actual male muses," Rovira Rullán of Roberto Paradise tells me. For instance, there were Pablo and Efrain Del Hierro, identical twins from Puerto Rico who helm the aggressive, puppet-based performance collective Poncili Creación; Bernhardt befriended the duo and named a 2015 solo show at Venus Over Manhattan in their honor. More recently, she's been stuck on Francesco D'Angelo, a 27-year-old Peruvian who was an in-house anthropologist, researching local culinary traditions for the chic restaurant Mil, outside Cuzco. Bernhardt met him when she was in the country for a museum exhibition, and the two started a prolific WhatsApp correspondence. She's been making him his own bootleg Balenciaga sweatshirts. This month Karma will publish an obsessive, reverent book of drawings that Bernhardt has made of Francesco, many of them based on his selfies.

Travel—chasing those inspirations—has been a constant in Bernhardt's life, and becoming a mother hasn't slowed her down a bit. Shortly after our meeting, she and Khalifa were flying to Guadalajara, Mexico, where Bernhardt would make ceramics as part of a residency at the Cerámica Suro factory. She's bought (*continued on page 171*)



Bernhardt's paintings are unabashedly fun and proudly illogical, yet executed with thoughtful, painterly chops.



CONTINUED FROM PAGE 153

and renovated a massive former car dealership in her hometown of St. Louis that will double as a storage facility for her own work and an alternative exhibition space. (Any artists on view will have to compete with the custom floor mural she's planning, which will feature a wild pattern of Xanax pills and Scotch-tape dispensers.)

And after more than two decades, Bernhardt is now thinking hard about trading New York for Puerto Rico. "I'm just sick of living in cities," she says. "I want to do something different." Though it's a big deal to uproot herself, the move likely won't prove much of a culture shock. Rovira Rullán says that he already thinks of Bernhardt as an honorary Puerto Rican. "She's kind of a blunt and open person, and Puerto Ricans are also that way," he tells me. "Every time she comes here, the first thing she does is rent a car, and every day she goes to a different town or beach. She knows more places in Puerto Rico than I do."

This despite the fact that Bernhardt doesn't really speak Spanish. "Poquito," she says. "Spanglish." She's working with an architect to convert an epic property in the heart of Old San Juan. It'll boast a 40-by-8-foot indoor pool, which Bernhardt is outfitting with custom tiles that she'll produce in Guadalajara; she hasn't yet decided between a watermelon and a Pink Panther motif. "I can't really stand another year here in New York," says the woman whom many see as a quintessential fixture of the New York art world. She happily imagines her future life in the Caribbean: "Swimming a lot. Living in a *house*—not an apartment in Brooklyn that looks at a brick wall."

Maybe it'll jump-start a whole new way of seeing, a whole new Bernhardt. She's always absorbed the distinct flavor of her surroundings. A long-ago residency in Vienna, she tells me, temporarily saturated her paintings with an Art Deco flair; while working on portraits in Greece, "everything was super whitewashed [with] light," and her subjects began to resemble statuesque goddesses. For this new chapter in her life, she's been psyching herself up in the studio by blaring Latin pop on Z100, overseeing the renovations on the San Juan home she refers to as the Secret Magic Pool Garden. Down on the island, there's all sorts of stuff that could find its way into her paintings, from that boozy beach staple Gasolina ("Party in a Pouch!") to the surfboards of Rincon and the parrots of the El Yunque rain forest. Bernhardt's wild-eyed tropical fantasia is only about to get brighter, hotter, and louder. ❖

SCOTT INDRISEK is a writer and occasional artist living in Brooklyn.



CONTINUED FROM PAGE 147

a Sentinelese man is pumping both fists in what is obviously a victory dance as the boat retreats.

The anthropologists then motored up the coast, leaving coconuts, bananas, and plastic buckets on a deserted beach, and then watched as the Sentinelese carried away the offerings. But even that did not win over the tribe: The gift-dropping expedition was halted when the film director was wounded in the thigh by an arrow. When the anthropologists later tried to leave even more offerings, the tribe immediately speared a bound live pig with their long arrows and buried it in the sand. A cotton doll left to test if they would let a human-shaped object cross their beach into the island's interior suffered a similar fate.

After that, anthropologists continued to make intermittent and unsuccessful visits to the island, and sometimes the outside world washed up on its shores. In 1981, a Panamanian freighter ran aground on the barrier reef during a storm. A few days later, a lookout spotted about 50 naked "wild men" waving bows and arrows on the beach. As described in *The American Scholar*, the crew then radioed the Regent Shipping Company's Hong Kong office and begged for an airdrop of guns: "Worrying they will board us at sunset. All crew members' lives not guaranteed." Robert Fore, an American pilot who was working nearby, ended up landing a helicopter on the ship's deck in high winds and plucking more than 30 sailors and their dog to safety. Fore had flown combat missions in Vietnam, he said, "but this was unique." They left behind a ship's worth of iron to be hammered into arrowheads, as well as tons of less useful chicken feed.

The most recent contact of note was in 2006, when two Indian fishermen, believed to be drunk on palm wine, drifted ashore. Other poachers watched from outside the barrier reef as the Sentinelese hacked them to death with what were probably adzes, which an anthropologist has speculated that the tribe "must have endowed with magical power, to keep away the evil spirits." When a helicopter investigated the deaths, archers drove it away, but not before rotor wind whipped sand off shallow graves—revealing a pair of corpses. After some time, the bodies were reportedly dug up and hung like scarecrows on bamboo poles, facing the sea.

• • •

4. God's University

Chau learned this violent history while researching the tribe on his laptop. As he read on a missionary's blog the summer after his freshman year of college: "The Sentinelese may be the greatest missions challenge

anywhere!" Instead of being daunted, though, he appears to have tried to strike up a correspondence with the missionary, writing, "Hi! I genuinely believe that God has called me to go to the Sentinelese."

Chau was attending Oral Roberts University in Tulsa, Oklahoma. Oral Roberts, nicknamed "God's University," is one of the nation's most conservative colleges and has the stated goal of fostering "evangelistic capability" in its students. In 2018, Oral Roberts sent about a seventh of its student body abroad on missions.

It wasn't long before Chau was working with the university's Missions and Outreach department, under Bobby Parks, a boyishly handsome and enthusiastic 30-something. Chau helped Parks coach refugee children in soccer for Park's not-for-profit organization and perform local missions. Parks would later describe on social media his mentorship of Chau as similar to how the older apostle Paul guided the younger Timothy. While at Oral Roberts University, Chau traveled twice to South Africa—once with Parks's department and later to coach and teach "life values" at a Christian soccer academy, one of the countless institutions that accept short-term missionaries in the world-spanning evangelical travel industry. After these experiences, Chau wrote, "ORU missions gave me direction in my life."

Other than his dedication to missions, Chau was basically a typical college student, albeit at a school without frat parties. He had an affinity for root beer, discussed Jesus for hours, and signed a pledge to abstain from "unscriptural sexual acts, which include any homosexual activity and sexual intercourse with one who is not my spouse." Even in such a God-fearing environment, Chau stood out for his piety, making his friend Nicole Hopkins "question whether or not I was as sold out for Christ as I claimed to be," as she later wrote on social media. Despite his conservative background, he was "hardly the stereotypical, Bible-thumping 'fundamentalist,'" said a friend, who came out to him as homosexual. In a message responding to that revelation, Chau wrote, "I see people as people, sons and daughters of God as their identity," and said he would be willing to bless his queer brothers as much as his straight brothers. Chau was "an introverted social butterfly," said another friend—reserved at first, but forging many deep relationships over time. Hopkins wrote me: "I've never met a man who loved others so selflessly." And yet whenever Chau could, he left the city of Tulsa—which he described as "relatively devoid of natural beauty"—for the spiritual solitude of the woods. He cultivated a backpacker vibe, sprinkling his speech with "stoked" and "rad," and bulked up through constant athletic activity.

Upon graduating with a degree in exercise science, in 2014, Chau led a third mission trip to South Africa for the department run by Parks. Then, according to his personal blog, it was off to an autonomous region in northern Iraq to organize soccer games in refugee camps for Parks's organization. After the high of adventures like these, Chau settled into a one-year AmeriCorps contract on a disaster-preparedness team back in Oklahoma. Staring at the gray felt walls of his workspace in October, he Instagrammed, "Never thought I'd be working in a cubicle. #reallife