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“E.T. And Xanax: An Interview with Katherine Bernhardt” Wallace Ludel, Cultured Magazine. January 16 2020.  
<https://www.culturedmag.com/katherine-bernhardt/>

### E.T. and Xanax: An Interview with Katherine Bernhardt

*The artist spoke to Wallace Ludel about her drive to paint nostrils objects, pop culture’s obsession with drug use and what it’s like to move back in with her parents.*

“Katherine and E.T. have lots in common,” wrote Katherine Bernhardt’s sister Elizabeth, in an essay on the occasion of the artist’s solo show, “Done with Xanax,” which opened last week at Canada Gallery’s new Tribeca location. “Growing up in the suburbs, she immediately identified with E.T., who himself landed in a suburban setting and could not figure out how to get away from it while suffering great existential pain.” In the show, Bernhardt debuted 11 paintings, each of which stars the empathic, titular alien of Spielberg’s 1982 masterpiece. In Bernhardt’s distinctive style, objects like Pac-Mans, telephones and Xanax bars float freely in the singular universe of her canvases. In this world, the extra-terrestrial once again becomes our protagonist. Painted by Bernhardt on the patio of her childhood house, the paintings’ nostalgia grows more poignant. May we all be so lucky as to phone home.

**Is it correct that this body of work was made in your childhood home?** Yeah, I usually come back here for the summer. I like to work outside in the summertime, so I come here and work out on the patio. I started those paintings last summer and I also moved back into this house.



**So you now live in your childhood home again? I have a running joke as a writer that, when I try to write in my childhood home, I’m just pretending I’m not at the source of the traumas that made me a writer in the first place.** It’s good to be back here to get it all back in my psyche again. And I’ve painted E.T. before—I painted him at the Art Institute of Chicago as an undergraduate, so I’m coming back around to it again.

**Why E.T.?** I guess I was seven when the movie came out; it was a huge influence on me and I was totally obsessed with it.

**I once likened something in an essay I wrote to the moment of God and David’s fingers touching in the Sistine Chapel. My editor suggested I change it to E.T. and Elliot’s fingers. It was a great edit.** That is really good.

Katherine Bernhardt (on right) and childhood friend, Halloween 1982

**Tell me about the title—“Done with Xanax”?** That’s another obsession that I’ve been working through. It’s about how, in popular culture and music, they’re all talking about Xanax and drug culture. Everyone’s on pills. It’s just a popular culture reference.

**And is there a significance when the Xanax pills and the E.T. merge in certain paintings?** Kind of—well, not really. They’re pretty separate. It’s my whole thing with the pattern paintings: putting things together that have nothing to do with each other.

**Yes, obviously your paintings are full of scattered objects and things. What’s your relationship to materiality and thing-ness?** I mean, I love things. I love things from the ’80’s. I love design.



Installation view of “Done with Xanax.” Image courtesy the artist and Canada.

**Design from the ’80’s because that’s when you were a child?** Yeah, that’s also why I painted the Swatch watches.

**Yeah I think of your work as having an aesthetic that recalls that era. Why do you think you have the impulse to revert to imagery from your childhood?** I always try to go back. That’s what’s important to me. I mean, what else are you going to paint? The E.T. stuff came about because I was here last summer and I found my sticker book. All these things are in it. I have E.T. stickers, Pepsi stickers, strawberry stickers, Yoda and Star Wars stickers. So I decided to paint them.

**I love that. It’s so weird that you would have Pepsi stickers.** And we just found a “Pepsi Generation” card in the garage, like I was a member. It says, “This card identifies its holder as an official Pepsi Generation member. The Pepsi Generation card will be honored at all Pepsi Generation events and on special offers.”

**That’s incredible. I feel like your work is so playful and so full of joy and whimsy, but I also think that you’re dealing with real shit, and working through nostalgia and memory.** People will say things like “I could do that” or “it looks like a kindergartener did that,” so that’s funny to me. It’s like, try to do it, you can’t

do it. It is definitely high and low, it's kind of silly to paint E.T.s, but, like I said, what else are you going to paint? It's like a self-portrait show.

**It's substantial to look at our own childhoods this way. And there's a fruitfulness to the "my kid could do that" nonsense. I'm not religious but I know Christ said, "Unless you become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven."** I love it when kids come to the show and they like the paintings and can relate to them. It means anyone can relate to them. Some kid came to the opening, he was probably about 7. He's totally obsessed with E.T. and he brought his E.T. doll with him to the gallery.

**There's no better indicator of good art than that kind of universality. Some of these paintings felt different in the way you handled the acrylic. What caused this change?** The acrylic is more watery and weird. My paintings get weirder when I make them here. It's intense living here, so the intensity gets into the paintings. My sister and niece, me and my son, my parents, my brother and everyone—we're all in one house again. I'm in my old bedroom where I grew up. I like the chaos of it all, I want it in my paintings.

**Oh my god. You're able to work in that environment? That would be so hard for me.** I try. My studio in Midtown St. Louis is almost ready.

**Anything else you'd like to say about the show?** There are lots of paintings that I made that aren't in the show. I wish people could see the other paintings; there's lots of paintings of Reese's Pieces and Speak & Spells. There's one of E.T. just with strawberries.

**I was wondering why there weren't any Reese's Pieces paintings.** There were lots of Reese's Pieces paintings, but they didn't make the cut.



Installation view of "Done with Xanax." Image courtesy the artist and Canada.