



“Why Katherine Bernhardt’s Freewheeling Paintings Attract Collectors of all Kinds” Shannon Lee, Artsy. May 18, 2020. <https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-katherine-bernhardts-freewheeling-paintings-attract-collectors-kinds>

Why Katherine Bernhardt’s Freewheeling Paintings Attract Collectors of All Kinds



Portrait of Katherine Bernhardt. Courtesy of the artist.

Katherine Bernhardt paints whatever she wants, and the art world loves her for it. Packed with seemingly haphazard Day-Glo washes of watermelons, cigarettes, toucans, coffee makers, Pink Panthers, and Nike swooshes, Bernhardt has an indiscriminate approach to subject matter. Describing the omnivorous, unstoppable nature of her practice, Phil Grauer—a founder of New York’s Canada gallery who co-represents the artist with Xavier Hufkens in Brussels and Carl Freedman in London—said, “She’s like a fire you can’t put out.”

Originally from Clayton, Missouri, Bernhardt received her master’s degree from New York’s School of Visual Art (SVA) in 2000. By that time, there was already a percolating market for her paintings. Jerry Saltz—who,

according to Grauer, had seen her work as a visiting critic at SVA—wrote a rave review of her second solo show at Team Gallery in 2001 for the Village Voice. “Some art we like in spite of ourselves,” wrote Saltz. “That’s how I feel about the raucous work of 26-year-old Katherine Bernhardt, whose paintings are some of the loosest around.” By 2015, Saltz crowned her “the female bad-boy” of contemporary art.



Katherine Bernhardt, *Pepsi Planets*, 2019. Courtesy of the artist and Canada.

These days, a Bernhardt painting can fetch as much as \$81,250—the record-breaking result for *PLANTAINS, BANANAS & TOILET PAPER* (2015) achieved at Sotheby’s in 2018, just over double its high estimate. “People really started talking about her work in 2015 when she had her show at Venus over Manhattan and Los Angeles, and at Carl Freedman Gallery in London,” said Rebekah Bowling, senior specialist and head of afternoon day sales at Phillips. The auction house’s 2015 sale of Bernhardt’s *Hawaiian Punch* (2014) for £37,500 (\$56,330) is often seen as the beginning of the artist’s secondary market success, and marked her first auction result over \$50,000. While most of her works still sell for less than \$50,000 at auction, the secondary market for Bernhardt’s paintings is going gangbusters in terms of volume—her work came to auction 33 times in 2019, and 2020 is on pace for a similar tally, despite the COVID-19 pandemic (which has left the artist stranded in Guatemala since March).

“Pattern painting” is the term Bernhardt uses to describe works like *Hawaiian Punch* and *PLANTAINS, BANANAS & TOILET PAPER*. Inspired by the graphic, two-dimensional illustrations featured on Moroccan rugs—Bernhardt has a side business as a rug dealer—and the drippy, freehandedness of street-art murals, these expansive works now make up the core of Bernhardt’s oeuvre. She first debuted this style in 2013, at

the gallery Roberto Paradise in Puerto Rico. An avid traveler, Bernhardt infuses her pattern paintings with a mixed bag of disparate cultural ephemera from both near and far. “She’s a travelogue person,” said Grauer. “She’s like a sponge.”



Katherine Bernhardt, *Hawaiian Punch*, 2014. Courtesy of Phillips.

Prior to developing the “pattern” works, Bernhardt was painting fashion models. Referencing photographs, she painted them with a manic, almost feverish fandom. “I was painting them because I loved them—I was obsessed with them,” she said in a 2019 profile in GQ. “Gisele! Kate Moss!” While these works saw mixed results when they started appearing at auction back in 2010, they’ve done quite well in recent years. A larger work in this series, *JAUNEL MACKENZIE WITH FRIENDS OR “WINTER SPECIAL CRAZY FUN”* (2005), sold for €32,500 (more than \$35,000) in an online sale at Sotheby’s in February—again, more than double its high estimate.

Recent institutional support has also helped boost Bernhardt’s market. In addition to the crest precipitated by her 2015 Phillips sale, her 2017 show at Texas’s Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth and a hometown mural commission for the St. Louis Contemporary Art Museum in Missouri created a second peak in market demand for her work.



[Left] Katherine Bernhardt, *E.T. on Bike in Basket*, 2019. Courtesy of the artist and Canada.
[Right] Katherine Bernhardt, *Done with Xanax*, 2019. Courtesy of the artist and Canada.

The price of Bernhardt's work is also heavily predicated on the fact that her paintings, over time, have gotten much bigger. "When I met Katherine, she was painting in her studio apartment," said Grauer. "She literally made them at the end of her bed on pre-stretched, store-bought canvases."

With success came larger spaces, and with larger spaces came larger paintings. The record-breaking *PLANTAINS, BANANAS & TOILET PAPER* measures a whopping 8 by 10 feet. At the 2018 edition of Art Basel in Basel, the artist made a splash in the Unlimited sector with *Blue Skies* (2018), a 69-foot-wide painting. Despite her phenomenal commercial success, it's still possible to purchase a modestly sized Bernhardt pattern painting for a little more than what her work was selling for during her bedroom studio days. An untitled 2016 work on paper sold for £6,875 (\$8,500) through one of Phillips's online auctions last month. Last summer, at the Upstairs Art Fair in the Hamptons, Canada sold Bernhardt's small paintings of cartoon cats Garfield and Pink Panther for \$12,000 and \$5,000 apiece, respectively.

Describing Bernhardt's impulsive painterliness as a new kind of Impressionism, Grauer compared her to Monet. "She paints her obsessions," he said. "It's less about phenomena in shifting natural light and more about the shit we desire in the iridescent glow of online shopping."

That commercial sheen has translated into consistently growing market demand—the audience for Bernhardt's work is boundless. "I think they're appealing to new collectors and established collectors alike," said Bowling. "It's private collectors that are totally international, from the U.S., Europe, and even Asia now. I think that speaks to the universal resonance of her work; they represent contemporary culture and the palette is joyful and they're fun."

"She doesn't play by the rules," said Grauer. "Every painter in the gallery has a real admiration and a sort of dumbfounded awe of her skill and fearlessness. Artist support for her speaks to the courage of the work."

With seemingly universal approbation from collectors, gallerists, critics, institutions, and fellow artists, Bernhardt's career and market trajectory seem all-around unstoppable. "They just love the attack and admire the way that they are inherently flawed and inherently beautiful, painted masterfully," said Grauer. "Or they recognize the things and just adore it."



Katherine Bernhardt, *Untitled*, 2019. Courtesy of Phillips.