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## Something Wild

Some art we like in spite of ourselves. That's how I feel about the raucous work of 26-year-old Katherine Bernhardt, whose paintings are some of the loosest around. Her style is a hybrid of funk, punk, pop, and every kind of expressionism, be it abstract, neo-, German, or East Village. She paints things I'm often suspicious of or have seen too many times before: fashion models, consumer goods, and pop stars. Her palette is brash and her touch jumpy. Yet Bernhardt's work—for all its flaws—sends me. Although I sometimes wince at it, I admire her raw, painterly nerve. If gall is something paintings can have, hers have it. She's a natural, even if I can't say exactly what kind of natural that is.

Bernhardt excels at applying streaky mixtures of glitter, thin acrylic, and pearlescent paint in quick brush strokes on stark white grounds. She's great at painting big '80s hair. Less than two years out of the School of Visual Arts, Bernhardt has a two-gallery, 36-painting mini-extravaganza—her second solo effort in 18 months. The first, at Team, was as promising as it was offbeat. Loaded with slapdash paintings and scribbly drawings of E.T., Kobe Bryant, and Nikes, along with several blaring abstractions and a bevy of fashion portraits, the show displayed a wildly inspired amateurishness.

Bernhardt's current double show evinces the same wildness, though tempered somewhat by ambition. At Team, *Nighttime Thong* (all works are dated 2001) is a savage redux of a *Cosmo* cover featuring Jennifer Lopez in a revealing blue bra and polka-dot panties. Bernhardt turns the singer into a possessed devil diva, painting a white star between her eyes à la Manson and giving her an unruly mane of blond and brown hair. Similarly, a portrait of Cher with a butterfly in her curls makes this perennial screwball look all the more disturbing. Elsewhere, Björk is transformed into a contortionist ballerina. A serene beach scene, as bland as any by Alex Katz, shows that Bernhardt is capable of many moods. Unfortunately, two large paintings—one of a fully clothed girl in bed, another after a Versace ad—suffer from the increase in scale, which overpowers her technical prowess. And the girl in bed recalls coy, British "neurotic realist" Martin Maloney. Still, the smaller *Freckled Girl*, with serpentine locks and too much eye shadow, has a real "Rebel, rebel, your face is a mess" tartiness.

Many of Bernhardt's recent pictures of women reveal a love-hate relationship with femininity and beauty. Unlike Karen Kilimnik, whose approach to glamour and fashion is much more that of an ingenious shrinking violet, Bernhardt cops a more petulant, bitchy, and skeptical attitude. Her hand is also freer: Her technique is so unrestrained she might seem to share traits with mega-renegade Sigmar Polke. But Polke is more experimental, cosmic, ambivalent, and detached. He's an iconoclast. Bernhardt's all about enthusiasm, animosity, freedom, and play.

Like Polke, Bernhardt has a real feel for abstraction. Except for one luminous fireworks-like image, this gift isn't enough in evidence at Team. But at Modern Culture—the better of the two

shows because the paintings are smaller, more packed together, and not as oriented toward portraiture—there are several stunning quasi-abstractions. Of these, *Art Deco Scotsman*, a brightly colored, psychedelic pattern painting with two Scotties; *Young Olympians*, a combination of bright McDonald's logos and interlocking Olympic rings; and *Pinkness*, which features floating M shapes on a pinkish ground, are all aces and look like the love children of abstract expressionism and pop. A fellow Bernhardt admirer, painter Cheryl Donegan—who, in her own process-oriented, cerebral way, fits into the rowdy-painting category—calls Bernhardt “the fucked-up daughter of Rothko and Warhol.”

Which suggests another comparison. Bernhardt—along with Donegan; Jutta Koether; L.A. painter Mari Eastman; the blunter rookie, Karen Heagle, whose capable debut is currently up at 31 Grand in Williamsburg; Dana Schutz, whose loosey-goosey paintings looked enchanting at P.S.1 last month; and Tracy Nakayama, maker of cute nudie watercolors—may be updating the idea of the prodigious male '80s painter. All of them have retrieved a trace of the elusive, unstrung Martin Kippenberger gene and have forsaken fussiness. Rather than portentous subject matter and egocentric behavior, this crew relishes the technical bravado associated with '80s painting but eschews the theatricality and self-promotion. And while painters like John Currin and Lisa Yuskavage are rightly lauded for their “skill,” these women are looking into alternative definitions of the term.

All of these artists—and a handful of male painters—are interested in the crude, the physical, the personal, and the voracious. Praising them is not advocating a return to the excesses of neo-expressionism or a revival of bad East Village painting. But wildness should always be welcome in the art world—especially when it's not the affected or obnoxious kind. As for Bernhardt and her ilk, I don't know if any of them will be stars—their work may be too out-there, brash, and free for that; some of it's even ugly. Nonetheless, the art world would be a better place if it could see them all shine.