

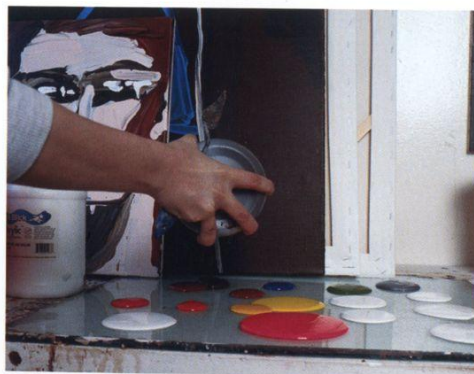
whitewall

ISSUE 2

WHAT COULD ALMOST BE CONSIDERED A CREEPY ADHERENCE TO USING PICTURES OF MODELS OR “BEAUTIFUL PEOPLE” from magazines as source material is instead an illuminating response to commerce-driven rhetoric. Rather than communicating through artifice and illusion, Bernhardt’s paintings rely more on psychological moods and what she calls more primitive versions of our human selves.” Her prolific and workmanlike approach, tendency toward intimate scale, and consistent style all contribute to Bernhardt’s undeniably genuine appeal.

We went to Bernhardt’s studio near Parkside Avenue in Brooklyn on a beautiful sunny day to take some pictures and shoot the breeze. Bernhardt met us at the gate to her building with a wisecracking smile and an Austrian hunting cap perched on her head, and took us up to her apartment, which smells like vanilla coffee and is packed to the gills with art. Covering the walls of the dark sitting room are paintings by friends like Mari Eastman, Derek Mainella, Benjamin Butler, Stephanie Campos, Alison Fox, Renee Nikita, Brendan Cass, and Ellen Altfest, among others, as well as a photo of rap star Nelly by Michael Levine. There’s a painting of David Bowie, another of a fruit bat, one of Mike Tyson and Don King, a painting of a black cat, and a small painting of what looks like two turds with eyes and the words “live is the drug” painted across them. Bernhardt’s studio, as it were, is actually a tiny bedroom divided down the middle — a small bed in one half, and paints, canvases, and magazine clippings strewn across the floor in the other. There’s a man asleep in the bed, an etching of E.T. hanging above his head. “That’s my boyfriend, Ghurron,” Bernhardt says. “He works as a security guard and was working late last night.”

“ I FEEL LIKE RIGHT NOW, THAT THINGS ARE GOING REALLY WELL FOR ME ”



WHITEWALL: There’s a picture of you and Bono on your fridge.

KATHERINE BERNHARDT: I made some small paintings as gifts for this event that Bono’s wife was involved in. At the event you couldn’t get near him and all of his assistants were like, “His eyes are sensitive, he doesn’t want any pictures [taken of him].” So when I went to the bathroom I was like, “hey, I made the little paintings for you guys, can I take my picture with you?” And he was like, “sure.” I made like three hundred of the little paintings for my last show at Canada.

WW: Looking at your list of shows since you’ve graduated, you’ve done a lot of shows.

KB: Recently a lot, too. I feel like right now, that things are going really well for me. I’m really happy.

WW: Is this a current body of work? Who are these people?

KB: Gisele, the Brazilian supermodel, Tyson Beckford, Drew Barrymore, and then the other ones are models that I see in magazines.

WW: That’s been a consistent thing in your work, looking at fashion models. Why, what’s the interest?

KB: Basically, beauty.

WW: And it usually tends to be women.

KB: Yeah, it’s all women. There’s a couple men.

WW: So how long have you been here?

KB: About six months, but I’m getting a studio really soon. It’s a little cramped here.

WW: But if it’s not slowing down your production, then maybe it’s not really an issue. There’s a lot of work in here.

KB: Yeah, well, I also have a storage unit and a basement full of work. It’s fine for now, making them this size, but I want to make bigger stuff. I find out at the end of April if I get this studio in TriBeCa for a year. Those studios are beautiful ... If I don’t get that, or until then, I want to find a garage space.

WW: It’s usually useless, in my opinion, when people make comparisons, but people have nonetheless compared your work to

> Katherine Bernhardt

...

Jauneil with blue bouquet

2006

Acrylic on canvas

36 x 48 inches

Courtesy of Suzanne Tansiewicz, Paris



> Katherine Bernhardt

...

Women of the forest

2004

Acrylic on canvas

59.5 x 48 inches

Courtesy of Suzanne Tansiewicz, Paris



Elizabeth Peyton, with regard to the celebrity thing. There's also an English painter called Stella Vine, have you heard of her?

KB: Is she the one that painted Kate Moss?

WW: Yeah, people talk about your work in terms of celebrity and social commentary, although I'm not sure that's actually what it's about.

KB: Yeah, my work isn't really about that. It's about people I like, who I think are beautiful, and I want to make paintings of them

WW: Your paintings don't really deal in illusions, they're flat, almost graphic, but they unavoidably communicate ideas about ideal notions of beauty that are tied to fashion or models, rather than celebrity. So although there could be comparisons between your work and painters like Elizabeth Peyton and Stella Vine, yours seem to me more about the models than celebrity as such, even though supermodels are also celebrities.

KB: OK, yes, so I make paintings of models and celebrities, but I don't think it has anything to do with celebrity. I think it is more about making them or turning them back into their raw primitive human selves.

WW: One of the things I find interesting about your work is that almost all of your source material comes from fashion photography in magazines, which is a completely invented, illusory world of made-up beauty that relies on artifice to communicate. And yet your paintings seem to be at the polar opposite end of that spectrum. They could almost be pictures of a model who has

KB: I go back like twice a year. Christmas and New Year's and then I go back for summer.

WW: What's it like growing up there?

KB: It's totally degenerated and falling down ; the entire city is abandoned. They tear down all the historical buildings, it's horrible. But they are renovating this street called Washington Ave., which used to be old factories and businesses. They're turning it all into lofts, there's clubs and sushi down there now. It's superdangerous, though. It's really fun to drive around there, just because the buildings and the houses down there are amazing. There's an area there called South St. Louis that's really old, that's where my dad grew up, actually, and that area is becoming really gentrified now, too. But it's just one super-small area, and if you leave that area it's really dangerous.

WW: Detroit is a bit like that, it's got the most amazing old buildings downtown that are completely empty, and some really old mansion houses that are derelict. People are still reluctant to occupy those buildings, though.

KB: There's a street in St. Louis called Lindell Boulevard that has amazing old mansions. If I ever got rich and went back there, I'd buy one of those derelict mansions and fix it up.

WW: Was there a scene for young artists growing up in St. Louis?

KB: Not that I know of. I mean, I would try to go to the art museum because I thought that was cool, but not really, no — not that I know of.

“THE PAINT MAKES THEM A LITTLE SCARY”

stood under a heat lamp for too long and all of the makeup, silicone and collagen has just started melting. The fashion industry is vanity-fueled and its primary function is to sell a product, although that doesn't disqualify it from being a relevant medium. Some of the fashion photography I see can be more striking and sophisticated than a lot of paintings I see, so there's a crack where art and commerce have a sort of compromise, and art squeezes through ...

KB: I agree that the paint makes them look a little scary, but I am not trying to make them mean or ugly. I am trying to make very direct, painterly, strong women. I also think that there is a strong psychological mood to all of them.

WW: You're from St. Louis, when did you move to New York?

KB: In '98.

WW: What's it like in St. Louis?

KB: Oh, St. Louis is really nice. I love going home. It's beautiful. There's forest parks, there's the art museum. Now there's a new place called the Contemporary where they have totally current exhibitions, they have the same sort of stuff you could see in New York and the guy that used to run the New Museum in New York is the director out there now. There's the Pulitzer Foundation, which they just built and has more of a permanent collection, with more old-school sculpture dudes and painters. So that's two things going on. Then there's this area called Delmar and Lincoln which is my hangout. They are awesome.

WW: Do you still spend a lot of time there?

WW: And what about now, do you think there's stuff happening with younger, contemporary artists in St. Louis?

KB: I still don't think there is, not really. I don't really know of anyone there.

WW: I think it's worth talking about because, there can be a NY-centric, almost provincial, attitude that overlooks things happening regionally in America. Milwaukee, for example.

KB: I was actually just mentioned in this article about St. Louis artists living in NY and they listed four other people, but I don't know who they are. I mean, I think it would be awesome to move back to St. Louis, you could have a huge house, a huge studio, it would be awesome.

WW: I wonder, though, if there would still be this urgency to make work, but maybe that's just a romantic idea.

KB: I'm always, like, "I want to move to L.A.," but then people say, "but, no, then it would be to easy, it's too beautiful there."

WW: You have to wonder if luxuriating in space would slow down your production, it seems to me like you work really fast and in such a small space, too.

KB: No, I think I'd just keep on painting ...

WW: But you do work fast, though, don't you.

KB: Yeah, I work pretty fast. I was just in a residency program in Vienna for two months and I made over a hundred paintings. Yeah, I was super stressed-out. I would wake up every day

and think, “Oh, my God! I have to make paintings.” Over a period of 24 hours I would make four paintings, but I got into this really good rhythm. And because I was working constantly, the painting got really good, I was really happy with what came out of it.

WW: *Was that with Lisa Ruyter?*

KB: Yeah, that show just opened last Thursday. The place I got to live in and my studio there was enormous! I was living in this old-fashioned, eight-room, huge apartment with different wallpaper in every room — it was awesome; really high ceilings. And then a lot of that work got shipped to my show that’s opening in Paris.

WW: *So you’ve got two concurrent shows running in Paris and Vienna?*

KB: Yeah. And a group show in Copenhagen right now.

WW: *Your paintings do look a little messy ...*

KB: I guess they’re messy, but, I don’t know, I don’t think they’re undisciplined. I go there [points to the studio] and make paintings every day.

WW: *Well, they’re not academic.*

KB: I guess they’re academic in that they’re figure paintings.

WW: *I mean technique-wise. For example, you don’t use glazing as a technique.*

KB: Yeah, they’re more sloppy; to the point of putting the paint on the canvas. Just more straightforward.

WW: *What is the subject anyway? Women in magazines?*

KB: I guess it’s women in magazines or it could be psychological portraits. Maybe they’re all psychological self-portraits [laughter].

WW: *Because it’s women in magazines, the easy way to look at your paintings is that it’s about surface beauty, or commodified beauty. There’s lots of fancy ways of talking about that.*

KB: People say, “Why do you make them look so evil, they look like vampires?” But they’re not evil, they’re not vampires — they’re just some paint on a canvas.

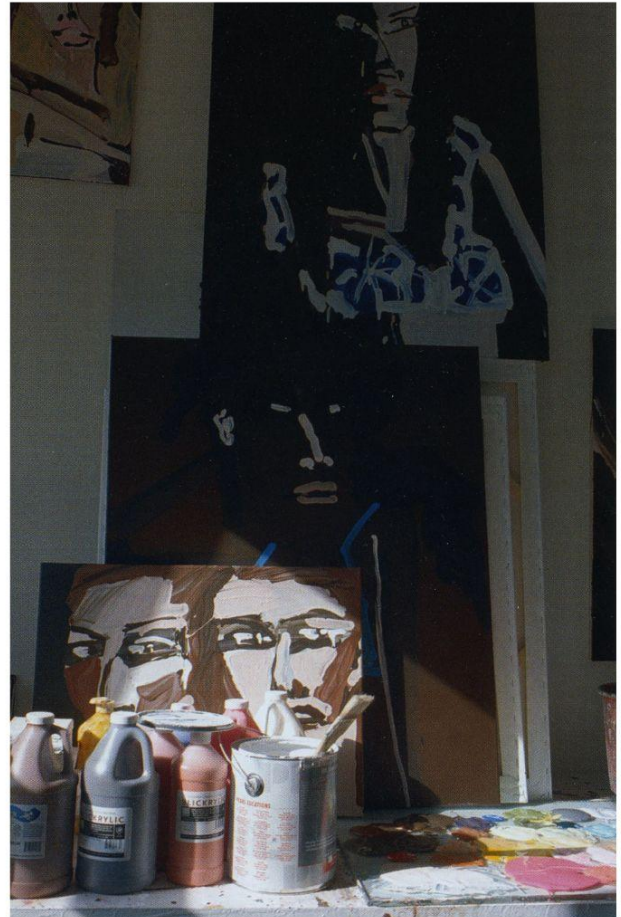
WW: *So, Jaunel McKenzie is your favourite model?*

KB: Yeah, I met her at Spring Street Natural, and I told her that she’s awesome and that I love her and that I make paintings of her.

WW: *Do you watch that show America’s Next Top Model?*

KB: Yeah I love that show. I also watch *Labour of Love*, *Wife Swap*, the whole House and Garden network. I made some paintings of Eve Pigford, the model that won a season of *America’s Next Top Model*. She’s awesome and I saw her on 23rd Street one day. I was watching this show last night, *Janice Dickinson: Supermodel Out of Control* one hour special... [laughter].

WW: *Do you ever work from life models?*



KB: No, but my boyfriend is a model. I’ve made paintings of him posing for me.

WW: *What’s the nightlife like around here?*

KB: There’s this one African bar that’s really cool ... the Belmont Lounge in Manhattan on Sunday night is incredible. That’s where I bruised my knee. **WW**

Bernhardt’s work is included in a group show, curated by Ellen Altfest at I -20 in June 2006 (557 West 23rd Street, New York, 10011) She also has a solo show at Gallerie Glance in Torino in June 2006.

Recent shows include Galleri Christina Wilson in Copenhagen; the Ulrich museum at Wichita State University, curated by Tyson Reeder; “Searching for Love and Fire” at David Castillo gallery, Miami; artist residency at Galerie Lisa Ruyter, Vienna; Galerie Suzanne Tarasieve, Paris.

Bernhardt is represented by gallery CANADA, NYC.