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Art Gallery Shows to See in February



Katherine Bernhardt's "I can't promise I'll try, but I'll try to try," 2022. Credit... via Katherine Bernhardt and Canada, New York; Photo by Joe DeNardo

This really shouldn't work at all. I found myself muttering this phrase while laughing before Katherine Bernhardt's latest paintings. I wasn't laughing because the paintings are funny, though they take the derriere of a cartoon character as their unlikely common theme. The laughter was closer to elation and the sort of relief that comes from watching a daredevil flirt with disaster and walk away from a stunt unscathed. The paintings in "I'm Bart Simpson, Who the Hell Are You," are as anarchic as they are glorious. "I can't promise I'll try, but I'll try to try" (2022), the centerpiece of the show, pushes past 20 feet in width, while crowding together pop icons from a 1980s childhood: Bart, Garfield, E.T. and mushrooms that conjure psychedelia more than Super Mario Bros.

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Bernhardt, who has moved her studio from Brooklyn to her native St. Louis in recent years, is now represented by both Canada and the mega-gallery David Zwirner. Her work calls to mind Laura Owens's and Chris Martin's ability to make great paintings out of subject matter associated with kitsch or childhood nostalgia, like inspirational graphic posters (Owens) or glitter-adorned canvases featuring solar-system planets (Martin). But Bernhardt is less of a technician than Owens and more wildly expressive than Martin. Her pigments pool, dye and blissfully wallow across her surfaces; her drips and sprayed lines record a loose ecstasy of color, saturation and improvisatory mark making. Like feats of cerebral abstraction from the previous century, but with added lulz.