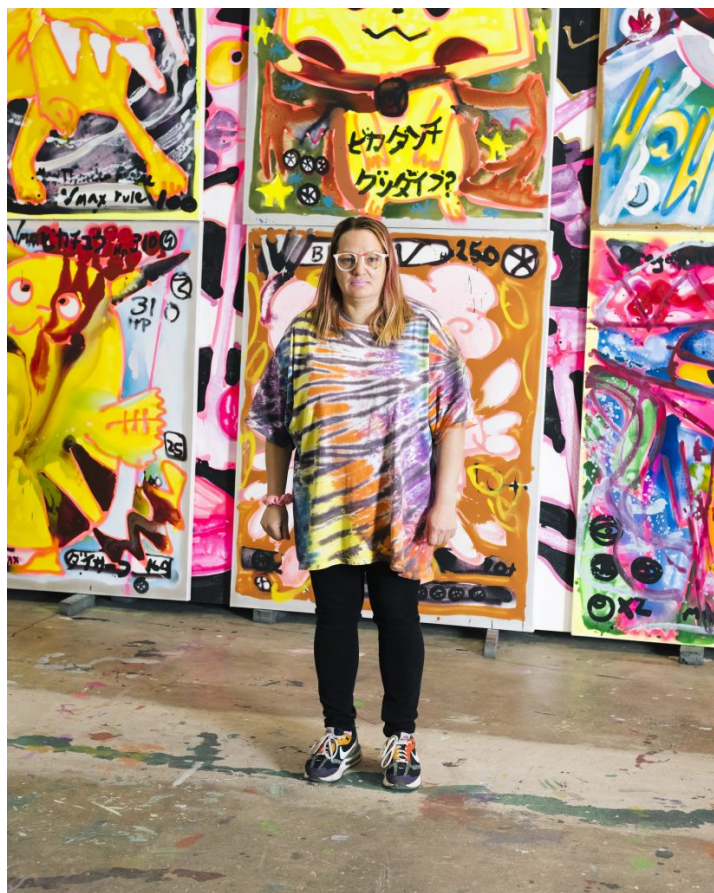


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Pokémon as Muse? See Artist Katherine Bernhardt's Exuberant New Paintings That Channel the Beloved Pocket Monsters



Katherine Bernhardt in her studio, St. Louis, 2023. Photo: Whitten Sabbatini

It's the artist's first solo show in Hong Kong.

For the past two decades, Katherine Bernhardt's schtick has been throwing everyday stuff onto the canvas in exuberant, messy, color-pop paintings. Ketchup, hamburger, toilet roll, toothbrush, cigarette—to scan a gallery of Bernhardt's is to see an artist who works instinctively, one who eyes something near-at-hand and then makes it massive, flat, and drowning in a sea of color.

Most recently, that thing within reach has been Pokémon cards. Bernhardt's son began collecting the cards during the pandemic and soon she too was a fan. Bernhardt captures the fun, vibrant escapism of the Pokémon universe in her new show at David Zwirner Hong Kong—deep breath —“Dummy doll jealous eyes ditto pikachu beefy mimikyu rough play Galarian rapid dash libra horn HP 270 Vmax full art,” set to run through August 20.

Most of the paintings on display in her first solo venture in Hong Kong

replicate the formal components of a Pokémon trading card: a rectangular portrait with a delineated border and inscribed with the Pokémon's Hit Points (HP), energy type, and skill moves, written in both English and Japanese.

As ever, Bernhardt is not one for pompous titles. *Surfing Pikachu* (2021) is as expected: a gleeful Pikachu racing through a sea of swirls on a pink surfboard. *Chansey* (2021) is typically affable, clutching her lucky egg that appears like a golden acorn, and labelled “#113” as per her Pokédex number.

The difference is in the execution. With Pokémon cards, which Nintendo released under the art direction of Ken Sugimori in 1996, the image appears glossy and computer-enhanced, the layout balancing artwork and gameplay information. Bernhardt’s “cards” have no such constraint. Colors collide and merge, and her creatures dominate the canvas, poking through borders in striking gestures that echo signature movements known from Nintendo’s video games.

This blurred, bold effect is a product of the frenetic pace at which Bernhardt works. In a process she has followed for much of her career, outlines are first hashed out in spray-paint, next she lays the canvas on the floor and layers on watered down acrylic paint, hence the bleeding of colors. Oftentimes, Bernhardt attacks multiple paintings simultaneously.

The rough repurposing of pop culture subjects is something of a Bernhardt staple. She’s previously painted Darth Vader, Pink Panther, Garfield, E.T., typically on hot tropical backgrounds. The show notes proclaim the St. Louis born artist is challenging “high-low dichotomies of contemporary painting” and by extension questioning art world value systems.

But she might just as readily be making Pokémon paintings because they’re fun.

“There was some criticism, like, ‘Oh, great choice of subject matter to paint.’ Like, what do you want me to paint? War zones and people dying and kids being killed? There’s enough of that on TV and in the real world,” she told the *South China Morning Post*.

“The art, for me, it’s more like an escape. And a world you can go into that’s colorful and good.”