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Lui, Mabel. "‘Like an Escape’: Show of US Painter’s Blown-up Pokémon Characters." *South China Morning Post*, 23 May 2023, www.scmp.com/lifestyle/arts-culture/article/3221142/pokemon-art-exhibition-american-painter-katherine-bernhardt-blows-pikachu-charizard-ditto-chansey.

Pokémon art exhibition by American painter Katherine Bernhardt blows up Pikachu, Charizard, Ditto, Chansey and more



Since its debut as a video game in 1996, *Pokémon* has captured the hearts of children, teens and adults alike through an expanded media universe of television series, films and collectible cards.

The star of the show, Pikachu – a bright yellow creature with pointed ears, circular red cheeks and a lightning bolt-shaped tail – has become universally recognised. And who can forget *Pokémon Go*, the augmented-reality mobile game that took the world by storm in 2016?

As of 2021, Pokémon was the highest-grossing media franchise in the world, pulling in US\$100 billion, far more than longer-established cartoon names such as Hello Kitty and even Mickey Mouse & Friends, according to media research firm Statista.

American painter Katherine Bernhardt, born in 1975 and based in St Louis, Missouri, is an avid fan.

The artist says in a video interview with the Post that she became enamoured with Pokémon through her son, who began collecting Pokémon cards two years ago.

Together, they built up their collection, and Bernhardt began thinking more in depth about the social aspect of the cards – how people would trade with friends and look through binders at the store together – and about its significance in pop culture.

A series of new works based on Pokémon cards are the focus of her first solo exhibition in Hong Kong, at David Zwirner gallery in Central.

Bernhardt, who received her master's in fine arts in 2000, received early recognition for her semi-abstract portraits of models from fashion magazines that interrogated beauty standards and the nature of idolisation.

In recent years, she has drawn inspiration from pop culture and objects that appear in everyday life, recreating cartoon characters in her own style and mixing them up with everyday symbols such as toilet paper and cigarettes.

She usually begins each work by using spray paint on upright canvases, working quickly and in an impromptu manner much like graffiti artists; this adds a frantic energy to the images that chimes with the pace of information flow in today's world.

Perhaps best known for her Pink Panther series, Bernhardt made another reference to Japanese visual culture in 2017, when she painted a mural 60 feet (18 metres) long, mural *XXL Superflat Pancake*, for the Contemporary Art Museum St Louis – the title an obvious nod to contemporary artist Takashi Murakami's "Superflat" manifesto.

The Hong Kong show's title is much more of a mouthful. "Dummy doll jealous eyes ditto pikachu beefy mimiky rough play Galarian rapid dash libra horn HP 270 Vmax full art" is a combination of the titles of several of the works on display.

Pokémon fans will immediately recognise characters such as Pikachu, Charizard, Chansey and Ditto, and all are magnified.

With one exception the paintings are all the same size (60 inches by 40 inches), which reflects the uniform format of the collectible cards. The exception, called *Yeti Gaming* after a gaming supply shop in her hometown that she frequents with her son, is 7 metres wide.

Among her favourite characters is Ditto, featured in *Ditto VMax Ju Ju* (2021). "This figure is so funny. It's just a blob, and it's pink," she says. In her painting, the character wears an almost exasperated expression, and is overlaid with black spray paint featuring the Japanese text from Pokémon cards.

Another highlight is *Beefy Mimiky* (2023), a depiction of the "disguise Pokémon" with a ripped, muscly body splattered with red, blue and green paint.

Pikachu is also represented in multiple paintings – it is viciously angry in *Pikachu V190 Charge* (2021), seen in a myriad of colours in *Rainbow Pikachu VMAX GMAX Volt* (2021) and happily surfing in *Surfing Pikachu* (2023), despite what looks like a tear running down its cheek.

Yeti Gaming (2021) – which covers an entire wall at David Zwirner – also features motifs from previous works, such as rolls of toilet paper, Elmer’s glue, pencils and a bottle of Clorox bleach.

Through all her paintings, Bernhardt hopes to continue highlighting the joy of life, despite the naysayers.

“There was some [sarcastic] 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 says.

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