

# PRESTIGE

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## Top of The Pops: Katherine Bernhardt Paints Pokémon



Ahead of her first solo exhibition at David Zwirner in Hong Kong, Katherine Bernhardt talks to Prestige about her love of Japan, the fluidity of pop culture and why Pokémon cards are the perfect never-ending subject matter.

Anyone who grew up in the '90s will remember the huddles of children, mostly boys, in playgrounds feverishly swapping or competing with Pokémon cards. Images of those neatly kept laminated folders – owned by the proudest and most keen of collectors – are still embedded in school memories. You can thank

the wonderfully titled “Dummy doll jealous eyes ditto pikachu beefy mimiky rough play Galarian rapid dash libra horn HP 270 Vmax full art,” Katherine Bernhardt’s first solo show in Hong Kong at David Zwirner, for bringing characters from Pokémon’s universe back to life.

American-based Bernhardt’s oeuvre is instantly recognizable; her ebullient painting style and vivid use of color are very much the results of her unique improvisational way of creating art. Her works typically depict pattern paintings of consumer objects such as Nike trainers, sharpies and laptops; as well as nostalgic pop characters such as E.T., Garfield, Bart Simpson and Pink Panther. Bernhardt first got close to Pokémon cards when her son and his friends started trading them, proving to be the perfect theme in her exploration of 21st-century pop art.

What was the inspiration behind the playful exhibition title?

The names all come from the Pokémon cards– there are thousands of these cards– and they all have funny, playful and intricate titles. The title for my show is made up but it comes from the cards as a group: it is a fun mix of some of the Pokémon names that caught my attention and that have captured the attention of millions of these card collectors around the globe.

Tell us about your relationship with Japan, from which Pokémon originates?

I have always been fascinated by Japanese culture. I have always loved the tea ceremony, the Japanese minimalist aesthetic, the bath culture, the cleanliness of everything, the presentation and unique tastes of the foods, and pretty much everything about Japan.

I was lucky to visit Naoshima, Japan's art island. I truly loved the houses made of burnt black wood in Honmura and the art dispersed outside, around and inside the Tadao Ando buildings. I love how there is only art on that island and nothing commercial, it's an environment for an idealist.

Why did you choose Pokémon cards as a subject?

Each individual Pokémon card is an amazing sample of 21st-century pop art in and of itself; it's a full composition that includes one character plus numbers and words often written in Japanese script.

In my show, the characters appear individually on singular canvases but each one is also just one face of a large stack. All of the paintings are the same size as a deck of cards would be. There are over 1000 different Pokémon cards in existence so there's a lot to choose from as a painter and admirer of them.

I like to paint things that are infinite, things that have no end, or combinations and patterns of things that can be painted infinitely; for this reason the Pokémon collection as a subject fits perfectly into my process of finding a never-ending subject matter for the creation of art.

Please talk me through your creative process?

Painting is a practice that I follow, and it chooses its own way. It means that some of it is conscious, and some of it is unconscious – much of it is affected by what a painter sees and experiences in the world. It's impossible to predict where it will go, just as it's impossible to predict what kinds of pop culture will emerge in the future or which colours will naturally pool together on a flat canvas on my studio floor. The only constants in a true painting practice are evolution and change. It's fun to think about this idea in relation to Pokémon characters, which are also always changing and evolving into different forms of the same character.

I tend to use a lot of splashy watery colours, some of the colours help make the painting themselves by pooling together in new and unpredictable ways. Runny paint will settle if the canvas is lying flat on the floor; the paint will do its own thing and help create new colours and designs all on its own. It's fascinating to watch that happen and see the results as the painting works on itself and completes itself. It's about fluidity and liquidity capturing and exploring elements of pop culture.