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### **This St. Louis House Is a Pattern-Filled Time Portal to the '80s**

In her home, the artist Katherine Bernhardt conjures the giddy heyday of the Memphis design group.



Amid the staid and stately stone and brick homes along the north side of St. Louis's Forest Park sits one house that's impossible to miss. As a child, the 48-year-old artist Katherine Bernhardt, who grew up a couple of miles away in Clayton, would marvel at the boxy, three-story structure — a commingling of mostly rectangular forms and cutouts, with a white plaster surface and a frame that stretches past the living quarters — through the window of her parents' minivan as they drove past it. Four years ago, she and her now-12-year-old son, Khalifa, moved back to her hometown from New York, where she'd spent more than two decades, in part to be closer to her parents but also because she was seeking a change. On a whim, Bernhardt went online to see if the property was for sale; she was handed the keys six months later.

The 6,000-square-foot Smith House, as it's known, was designed by Gary Glenn, who studied architecture at nearby Washington University in the 1960s. While on military duty overseas, he



In the dining room, Gaetano Pesce's Up 7 Foot chair stands on Michele De Lucchi's Sebastopole dining table, which is paired with Milo Baughman dining chairs. On the wall, a 2009 painting by Bernhardt. Credit... Emiliano Granado. Painting courtesy of the artist, Canada and David Zwirner

visited famed Modernist sites, including the Bauhaus in Germany, and Le Corbusier's Unité d'Habitation apartment complex in Marseille, France; he later worked in the architect Arne Jacobsen's office in Copenhagen. Upon returning to St. Louis, Glenn bounced around a few different architecture firms before starting his own practice in 1979. One of his occasional collaborators was Marcia Smith, an interior designer and boutique owner with bold, contemporary tastes. In 1984, the two paired up to build Smith and her husband, Herb's, house; what they created was a sensation. The Smiths' daughter, Ashley Smith Baptiste, who was in high school when she moved in with her parents and older brother the following year, says her peers called it "the 'Miami Vice' house" (the music video for the rapper Murphy Lee's 2003 song "Hold Up," featuring Nelly, would be filmed there).

While the structure itself epitomized the International Style that Le Corbusier and others popularized in the 1920s and '30s, its interiors were decorated with various pieces produced for or in the playful style of the Memphis Group, the design collective founded in 1980 by the Italian architect Ettore Sottsass. By the time Bernhardt arrived, however — the Smiths moved out in 2002 — the neon address sign that had shone from the entryway was gone; the built-ins had been ripped out; a wall had been fitted to the zigzag spine of an open staircase to accommodate a large TV; and what had once been black, white or vibrant, such as a cylindrical tomato red range hood in the kitchen, had been replaced with shades of gray.

Today, after a 17-month-long renovation that is still ongoing, Bernhardt seems like the inevitable occupant of the Smith House. There are strong similarities between the 44 or so Memphis pieces she sourced for the home — from Masanori Umeda's Tawaraya, a semi-enclosed platform that looks like a boxing ring but is meant to be used for conversation or

lounging, to Martine Bedin's Super lamp, with wheels like those on a toy car and exposed bulbs positioned as if on the curved back of a Stegosaurus — and Bernhardt's own flamboyant paintings: joyful, slightly abstract takes on familiar objects and icons such as cigarettes, melon slices, toilet-paper rolls, Diet Coke cans, Doritos, Swatches, Bart Simpson, Miss Piggy and E.T. (Her most recent show, at David Zwirner in Hong Kong, consisted of re-creations of Pokémon cards.) Her aim is not to exalt the mundane to the level of high art but to make us see her subjects anew and, while she's at it, make us smile.

In this way, too, Bernhardt is Memphis-aligned. Sottsass's philosophy, as he made clear when he invited his designer friends over for what would be the group's first meeting (Bob Dylan's "Stuck Inside of Mobile With the Memphis Blues Again" was playing in the background), was to make radical furniture that could be mass-produced, in humble materials such as terrazzo and plastic laminate. And if neither he nor Memphis ever became household names in the United States, their influence is now indelible. Before Bernhardt had ever heard of Memphis (and before the group's Instagram-fueled revival), she was obsessed with Esprit, the clothing company whose 1980s designs evoked the Milan-based collective by way of California. Nowadays, she keeps a closet's worth of old Esprit pieces — a shift with green and white stripes, a vest printed with multicolored ladybugs — in a guest bedroom that's also home to a free-standing wardrobe modeled after one of Sottsass's Superboxes.

In fact, Bernhardt considers the whole house a container for the '80s. Upon entering the L-shaped structure, a visitor is confronted by a Sottsass floor lamp that looks a bit like the face of an insect and, just behind it, a Bernhardt painting of E.T. in the shower. To the left is the dining room, which, as in the Smiths' day, has black walls and an asymmetrical glass-topped bar cart by Javier Mariscal for Memphis. To the right is the living room, for which Bernhardt commissioned a replica of a wet bar that Marcia Smith had designed with Memphis laminate. The artist based the room's terrazzo floor — speckled white squiggles against speckled black — on a Marco Zanini drawing that appears on the cover of "Memphis: The New International Style" (1981). On the second floor, Bernhardt's bedroom (there are four in total) features a wavy-edged Ultrafragola mirror (Sottsass again); an attached bathroom tiled in a Southwestern motif; and a spiral staircase leading to the third-floor library, which is filled with books about Memphis. Keith Johnson, the primary North American dealer of Memphis pieces, thinks the house might be the most thorough and daring homage to the movement in the country.



Bernhardt's painting "Bathing" (1982) hangs in the foyer. On the floor, from left, Sottsass's Ashoka lamp and Studio 65's Attica coffee table and Capitello chair. Credit... Emiliano Granado. Painting courtesy of the artist, Canada and David Zwirner

## Canada

60 Lispenard Street  
New York, NY  
10013

P: 212 925 4631  
E: [gallery@canadanewyork.com](mailto:gallery@canadanewyork.com)  
[www.canadanewyork.com](http://www.canadanewyork.com)

But it isn't just a tribute. The '80s-era furnishings live alongside contemporary artworks by Katherine Bradford, Rafael Ferrer, Marcus Jahmal, Eddie Martinez, Zéh Palito, Mary Weatherford and others. Bernhardt also strayed from how the house first looked by making the kitchen, like that in her parents' home, mostly turquoise — and, in a nod to both the Mexican architect Luis Barragán and the Pink Panther, another recurring figure in her work, painting the back of the house mostly electric pink.

The artist gets a clear view of those pink walls many evenings when, after coming home from her studio — a former auto body repair shop in St. Louis's Midtown neighborhood — she sits in the hot tub nestled inside the outdoor pool, which is surrounded by concrete slabs painted to create long lines of alternating hues: lavender and orange, black and green, red and brown. On the day that Glenn came over to see what Bernhardt had done with the place (he approved), she told him that a pair of ducks had also started frequenting the pool area. "Maybe," he said, "they like the colors."