

## ELLEN BERKENBLIT

### ANTON KERN

Ellen Berkenblit's 20 large, graceful boisterous paintings—with deep dramatic palettes—exhibited impressive painterly mettle. The cartoonish figure that has starred in many of the artist's fantastical creations for over a decade has metamorphosed. The sweet introvert with roundish features and a bulbous nose has become a slightly mischievous extrovert with an angular face, pointy nose and thick lashes. She likes ribbons, this one, and loves to frolic.

In the show's strongest two works, *A Large Group of Bats* (2012) and *Pink Velvet* (2011)—both oil and charcoal on linen and approximately 7 1/2 by 6 feet—her long hair splash and slash downwards in large fan shapes, creating a swirling energy. In the former, her mane falls away from her upturned face, which as throughout the show, is depicted in profile. Her neck is cropped by the side of the canvas, as if she's suspended horizontally. In *Pink Velvet*, the hair swings down while her head, emerging from a rich green high-collared shirt, dives in from the top of the canvas. Here, the back of her scalp is exposed in one area, revealing a stitched section that suggests this alter ego might in fact be a doll.

In both paintings, ribbons sprout out of the figure's mouth: a faint, wispy gray string in *Bats* and a cluster of pink bands in *Velvet*. A recurring motif, the ribbons in the mouth, like the streamers of hair, serve as a painterly device to create movement and guide the eye through the picture. The action in both paintings takes place against black grounds giving the scenarios weighty, even sinister undertones that add gravity to the playfulness of the character, whose cheeks are always dabbed with pink.

Berkenblit's work has been called winsome, but she counters the girlishness with a strident boldness. In the jam-packed *Later That Night* (2012), a woman's leg, rendered in sensuous strokes of purplish blue and bright red and tucked into a high-heeled pump, slices through the right-hand side. The raised foot implies a hurried exit that contrasts with the lingering one-toothed girl whose sharply drawn profile enters the canvas from the top. In this work, Berkenblit seems to be pitting her adult self against her proxy—the child who inhabits a make-believe world. The sense of haste suggests exasperation with the surrogate, but Berkenblit is clearly not ready to abandon her adopted character.

The repetition of this persona in an exhibition this large may seem a bit much, but the works themselves are quite varied. The punchy *I Draw Blood* (2011) presents a large face that looks like a rascally tomboy with a blue baseball hat. It is less densely painted than many of the others, and the muted colors bleed into the fabric. The show was full of unexpected shifts in tone, color and technique. Once you entered Berkenblit's deftly painted fantasy world, you didn't want to leave.



Ellen Berkenblit: *Pink Velvet*, 2011, Oil and charcoal on linen 92 x 72 inches; at Anton Kern