

HYPERALLERGIC

Will Someone Please Give Ellen Berkenblit a Museum Show Already?

It is as if each of Berkenblit's distinctive works is an isolated, oversized panel from an unknown cartoon strip: we have no idea what happened before or what will happen next.

by John Yau on June 10, 2017

In Ellen Berkenblit's large-sized paintings, we encounter close-up views of a cartoonish netherworld that is almost always black. The characters are never whole: a hand with painted fingernails or a horse's head and neck, a single foot or a nude whose head and feet have been cropped. It is as if the distance between thinking and action, mind and body, can never be bridged, and the incomplete characters know only parts of themselves. This is a world without mirrors, where there is no possibility of self-reflection. Action (however minimal), rather than thinking, predominates.

The characters consist of animals (horses, a cat, and birds); a hand (usually with only three or four fingers visible) about to pluck or pinch something; a pointy-nosed young witch with long eyelashes, who can enter the painting from any edge. Flags, flowers, and umbrellas suggest that everything takes place outside, in a dark, sunless world. The hands and torsos tend to be a grayed violet, a deathly pallor. The hands, with their red nails, are pincer-like. Something sinister seems to be going on, but you can never figure out what.

There are 16 paintings in her current exhibition, *Ellen Berkenblit*, at Anton Kern Gallery (May 25 – July 7, 2017). Four are done on sections of printed calico, which have been joined and affixed to a canvas. The paintings measure between six and almost eight feet high and wide. Some are oriented vertically, others horizontally. She works in oil, paint stick, and charcoal. Her palette has been compared to the heightened color of German expressionist Ernst Ludwig Kirchner. In addition to black, she uses coppery browns, various hues of violet, saturated reds, blues, and greens.

Berkenblit has absorbed Pop Art's penchant for cartoons, transforming that cool, transparent domain into something far more challenging: a largely legible world that invites and resists interpretation. It is this push-pull, and all the forces she brings to bear to attain it, that contributes to her significant achievement. Rather than appropriating existing characters, she has created her own (and this extends to the hands), all of which are distinctive. They seem to be all id.

In "Lilac" (2017), the profile of a copper-colored horse's head extends all the way across the painting's black ground, from the left edge until its nose is cropped by the right edge. The scribbled black and vertical lines depicting its mane could be read as scars, though that might be pushing it too far. The two red, butterfly-shaped flowers poking up from the bottom edge on thin white stems, however, enhance the spatial image's ambiguity, while a ribbon painted in patches of light and dark violet disappears behind the crest of the horse's black mane and then reappears on the other side of its head, evoking depth and physicality. Is the ribbon a prize awarded to the horse? What about the other paintings of horses in the show, in which there are flags made of stripes and rectangles (abstract paintings)?



Ellen Berkenblit, "Scruffs" (2016), oil, paint stick and charcoal on calico, 62 x 45 inches



Ellen Berkenblit, "V" (2017), oil and paint stick on linen, 91 x 76 inches

One of the things I like most about Berkenblit's paintings is that verbal description takes you only so far. The violet ribbon, red butterfly flowers, and horse's head neither add up nor feel arbitrary. When she includes an abstract form, it is always smaller than the figure and begs interpretation. It is like having an answer on the tip of your tongue, as the saying goes, but never being able to spell it out. Berkenblit's paintings are engagingly perplexing.

Our inability to provide a context (or narrative) that explains what is happening in a Berkenblit painting goes against everything we know about cartoons, which are always clear and simple in their intent. It is as if each of her distinctive works is an isolated, oversized panel from an unknown cartoon strip: we have no idea what happened before or what will happen next.

Why are the hands plucking flowers? Will they be used in a potion or elixir? Is the purpose friendly or sinister? Time is suspended, and the action, however furious, never reaches resolution. At the same time, none of the forms fit comfortably within the painting's rectangles. A tip of a finger is cropped, or a horse's head extends beyond the painting's edge. It is as if the characters and creatures are trying to push beyond their circumstances, to jump out of their painted world into ours. All these tensions are pictorially invigorating.

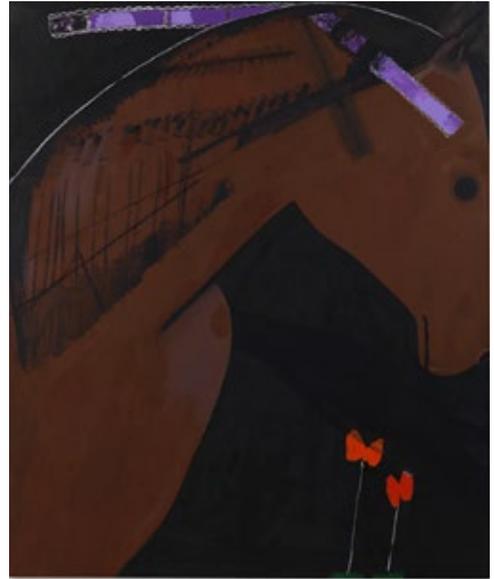
One painting, "The Foot" (2017), exceeds all the others, and reveals an aspect of Berkenblit's perceptual virtuosity — a form being two things at once — that we see hints of elsewhere, as in the flower that is also a butterfly.

The painting is a close-up view of a vertically aligned foot, pressing down on a reflective floor from the painting's top edge, while the large toe (the only toe we see) with its crimson nail is bent horizontally, parallel to the painting's bottom edge.

It is possible, however, to view the foot as a stubby leg, with a prominent butt (the heel of the foot), with red painted toenail as a deformed and swollen foot. The visual interplay between these two takes on Berkenblit's ambiguous form is funny, unsettling, and sharp. A lot of conjecture can unfold in the space between the two.

As I have written earlier: Will someone please give Berkenblit a museum show already? Isn't time that we stop doing reruns of Roy Lichtenstein and Andy Warhol and go on to something new?

Ellen Berkeblit continues at Anton Kern Gallery (16 East 55th Street, Midtown, Manhattan) through July 7.



Ellen Berkenblit, "Lilac" (2016), oil and paint stick on linen, 77 x 64 inches



Ellen Berkenblit, "Jonesy" (2017), oil and paint stick on linen, 18 x 26 inches