

BROOKLYN RAIL

ELLEN BERKENBLIT WITH ALEX A. JONES



ELLEN BERKENBLIT, UNTITLED, 2018. GOUACHE, GRAPHITE, AND FABRIC ON PAPER, 11 X 15 INCHES. COURTESY ANTON KERN GALLERY, NEW YORK. © ELLEN BERKENBLIT.

Once a part of the East Village scene, Ellen Berkenblit has been showing in New York since graduating from Cooper Union in 1980. Her earlier paintings had an affinity for the tubular, economical figure-style of vintage cartoons and comics, but have since sharpened, featuring pointy, angular forms and contoured intervals of explosive color. Certain specific characters have recurred through this formal evolution in style: a girlish witch with a pointy nose, a cat or a tiger, an ankle-strap stiletto, a nail-polished hand, and a little bird are among the cast of characters that have animated her alternately whimsical and spooky scenes. Her work could be compared to a long-running comic strip, like Nancy or Calvin and Hobbes run through an AbEx meat grinder. However, the figures in Berkenblit's paintings are red herrings for viewers who fixate on decoding them as images, for her work is not primarily narrative, or even pictorial. Especially in person, and especially in her larger works, the figures tend to wash out beneath

the physicality of painterly gesture, and are themselves better understood as gestures, or—as the artist would put it—as her own innate calligraphy.

I met Ellen in the lead-up to her forthcoming solo show at Anton Kern Gallery, *The Clock Unlocked*, which brings together drawings spanning the artist's career, including one childhood sketch of a witch in profile revealing how far back the image can be traced in her calligraphic unconscious. We discuss the compulsion to repeat, the magic of animation, and her recent literary commitment to the slowness of Marcel Proust. She is a painter with acute sensitivity to duration and time, and her practice spirals inward as she moves through her career, inscribing ever-intensifying signature lines.

Alex A. Jones (Rail): I saw your new film at the Drawing Center, which is called *Lines Roar*. Perhaps this is a good place to start our conversation; how did you get involved in making a film?

Ellen Berkenblit: Brett Littman, director of the Drawing Center, became interested in my work after coming to my last show at Anton Kern Gallery. He came for a studio visit and saw the situation in my studio—as with any artist's studio, it's almost like going into their bedroom.

Rail: Well, what someone's practice looks like is always a curiosity—is their studio filthy, or is it like a laboratory?

Berkenblit: Right. Mine's a little bit of both—very neat and very gross.

Rail: You do work in oils and charcoal!

Berkenblit: When Brett came to my studio, I was in the process of archiving my father's photographs. My father was a chemist, but he was also an obsessive photographer. He grew up in the Bronx, an only child in a really poor family—all four of my grandparents were immigrants. He built a darkroom in their tenement building, and when he was a teenager he started obsessively photographing everything in his house. He and I are so similar; we share this very practical, day-to-day, diaristic approach. Not a mystery how that happens in families. He and I always talked about how, after he died, I would archive his photographs. He also took a lot of film footage, and I think between talking about the photographs and footage with Brett (who has a lot of background in film) he proposed doing a film. I think first he wanted to do an animation, but it turned out to be everything but, in the Disney sense; there was no stop action, no cels. There was a lot of layering. But it was actually animation in the other sense of the word, it was me drawing live.

Rail: I'm very interested in that dual definition of animation. In one sense—in the media sense—of course it means to make a moving image, usually by compiling still images. But in the broader, older sense, it means to bring something to life.

Berkenblit: We did the second definition. I worked with two filmmakers, Mónica Brand and Francisco Lopez of Mogollon, who are actually a married couple. They are amazing, they are very synergistic, and we got along immediately. I had never painted or drawn in front of anyone in my life, I didn't even know how to begin; I just knew I wanted it to be made in the same way that I would make a drawing or a painting, which is off-to-the-side—not a direct picture. When John Yau wrote about my film, he referred to De Kooning's phrase "slipping glances."¹ When

the filmmakers first came to my studio, we talked about this idea of animation, and the very famous Picasso movie where he is painting behind a scrim (*Mystery of Picasso*, 1956) and we decided to try something like that.

Rail: Right, I recalled the Picasso film while watching it. As you're painting on the scrim, the focus becomes the animation of the gestures, like the lines are drawing themselves. I appreciated how your body, or rather your "performance" as the artist, is kind of minimized. Instead it's focused on the lines themselves, and on these ambient images from your studio that are cut in.

Berkenblit: They gave me a very small movie camera, like a spy camera, that for several weeks I just took home movies with. I would go up really close to things in my studio, in my home, on my walk between my studio and home—the textures; the cat's eye. I filmed everything in the same way I paint, in sections that are not necessarily a whole picture, but glimpses.

I also had a very specific idea for Zeena Parkins to do the soundtrack. I love her music, and we lived across from each other for many, many years on Ludlow street in the '80s up until 2005. We had a door that separated our two apartments from the rest of the building; we had the same crummy view out our windows, we drank the same water, we were immersed in each other's day-to-day. I also always felt like Zeena's music was what my paintings would sound like, and she thought that my paintings were what her music might look like.

Rail: Another thing that struck me about the film, partly I think because of its specific venue at the Drawing Center, was the hybridity of drawing and painting in your work. It's such a tired old subject in a way, to talk about these boundaries between media, but I was interested in the play between linework and the more liquid qualities of the paint as you were working.

Berkenblit: As much as I don't separate anything I do—it's not like 'oh I draw, and then I paint,' it's so integral—there are some physical differences between the two. The drawings in the film are kind of a hybrid painting/drawing, because they are huge. I usually don't draw that big, when I work on paper it's smaller than when I work on canvas. I work on drawings at a table at home, as opposed to my studio. It's a smaller, different mindset. Not a mindset, necessarily, but a smaller physical . . .

Rail: A different relationship to form, I would think. When you can encompass an entire form in your arm-span or line of sight, you have much more control over the draftsmanship, whereas when you scale up to big, body sized gestures, the relationship to representation changes.

Berkenblit: Yes, I think that's a very important difference. I do paint small sometimes, but there is something about working on a large scale that dissolves any form or image. I'm obviously having to go really close to the canvas, I'm not using a long stick like Matisse. So I'm seeing sections at a time. I love how that makes the actual work a glimpse, both as I'm working on it and I think also for the viewer. I love having people come up very close to the paintings. That's when the figures really dissolve. Because there's always that "figure" question.

Rail: Yes, people get very fixated on your figures, your little cast of characters—the woman, the horse, the heeled shoe, the cat. People always seem to be asking you what they are about. It's interesting you say part of what you're looking for is for those figures to dissolve once you get

up close to these paintings.

Berkenblit: I think that's a big part of it. It comes back to the physicality of it—all the lines I make are a very natural calligraphy, for me. They are my wingspan, what my arm does naturally, what my wrist does. And I always think of the lines that come out of me naturally as being the important ones that I want to get. It's very much like signing one's name.

Rail: Something one typically does over a whole lifetime.

Berkenblit: And it changes. I have a book at home that I got when I was a teenager and every few years I would sign my name in that book. At some point I stopped, but it went on for twenty years as my signature morphed. Everything kind of got economic.

Rail: Another formal element of your paintings that really stands out is the complex play between positive and negative space. This is related to the play between linework and filling in with color, I think... It's especially prominent in your paintings on textiles, where you use patchwork sewn fabrics in place of a canvas. The textile patterns push forward from the background, becoming activated, competing with what's painted on top.

Berkenblit: Yeah, that becomes a whole other puzzle almost. I have always liked the way paint hits any surface. Whether it's anonymously spilled paint out on the street, or a smooth or rough canvas in my studio—whatever. I like interference. I also really love fabric.

Rail: You're a lifelong seamstress, right?

Berkenblit: I have been a lifelong seamstress. I still love to sew, though I haven't been able to sew as much as I used to. I love fabric—the cotton of canvas or linen, any fabric—the same way I like any color. And so it came to me a couple years ago; I have a lot of fabric, so I started stitching different fabrics together to use instead of canvas or linen so that I would have a very discordant puzzle, not knowing what I was going to paint. It was an intuitive process very much like how I mix paint. Then I'd give them to my stretcher maker Matt from Alustretch, who would bring them back to me stretched and PVA'd so I could put oil paint on them. I like to keep as much of the fabric showing as possible.

Rail: Many of those paintings are very sparse. So, they became about reconciling the existing conditions of the patterned background?

Berkenblit: It's about nailing that moment where you transform something without painting it away. So yes, they're sparse. I have to work on them very slowly. I work on them for a long time but putting on just a little bit of a paint every day.

Rail: Right, and building up to that decision-making mark. The Mono-ha painter Lee Ufan talks about how, for him, the painting process is all in the buildup to that single mark or series of marks; instead of cutting loose on the canvas expressionistically, the intensity happens internally, until you just make that one mark that hopefully conveys or contains that.

Berkenblit: It's a little nerve-racking to do them, in a good way! And also different than painting on canvas, where I'm just painting for weeks and months, putting a lot of paint on, and the black paint becomes this bulldozer. The black is always very textural because there is a ton of paint

underneath. It's an eraser for me. The thing with canvases is that one can really paint forever on one. You can really build up a lot of paint. Working on the calico pieces is more similar to working on paper. There's a limit, and so you do have to concentrate. It's like you're at bat.

Rail: You know, another thing that the black paint does, though, is turn a lot of your canvases into these nocturnes. They all become like nighttime scenes, with very dark surroundings.

Berkenblit: It's funny, I know what you mean. I see that, but I don't think of it that way when I'm working on them.

Rail: I'm curious about where you are drawing your titles from, though, because there's enough references to Frankenstein, bats, and witches in your titles, maybe that reinforces my impression of their nocturnal element!

Berkenblit: There are! [Laughs.] But then there's a lot of funny stuff thrown in too. I feel like there is a lot of humor mixed in with the darkness. I grew up with a black and white TV set in the '60s, my parents didn't get a color TV set until much later. We had a darkroom in our house too, in one of the bathrooms. It was not a big house, and there were a lot of us; we needed the bathroom as a bathroom, but it became a darkroom! And so I grew up developing photographs with my father, thousands and thousands of black and white photographs. So I feel like I do look at the world in black and white sometimes. But, saying that, I'm also completely in love with color. Conjuring colors gives me sensations of flavor and words, so it's another language that carries me through my work; another little layer.

Then there's this other thing about cartoons, which is an important theme that a lot of people do ask about. I've always felt a kinship with cartoons. I'm not a cartoonist, but I feel it's something very akin to what I do, like Japanese calligraphy, which is finding how much information a line can convey, with the least amount of superego, the most economy.

Rail: Yes, there's that efficiency about cartooning, a necessity given the way animations are made, at least in traditional cell painting, or comic strips, where a figure needs to be simple enough to be repeated (somewhat) efficiently over and over again.

Berkenblit: Dan Nadel and I have talked a lot about the Nancy comics. Nancy is one of those comics, to me, that I always thought was fucking amazing, even when I was a kid. They're just so economical—a dot is saying so much. To me, that's something I find interesting in my work, or is what I want to be exploring in my work.

Rail: Nancy is one of those beautifully pneumatic-looking cartoons that I associate with that golden age of cartooning in the late '30s through maybe the early '60s. Everything looks like it's made of balloons, they're very round. I see that quality in your paintings from about ten years ago, the black and white paintings showing the girl who Carroll Dunham described as a cross between Snow White and Betty Boop. She has that pneumatic quality, she's very shiny, her clothes look like latex—I think there's something inherently erotic about that style of cartooning.

Berkenblit: This is where the word Frankenstein, or the feeling of Frankenstein, comes in. One can make something have life where there is none. You can bring something to life through craft, and piecing crap together.

Rail: Leading up to our conversation, I was thinking about this dual meaning of animation that we mentioned. Of course it means “to give life,” and I like how one image of that is filling something with the breath of life . . . like a balloon.

Berkenblit: No one is supposed to talk about this, but it’s magic. The word magic is one that maybe sounds romantic or corny, but I think it’s a very important thing that is maybe underrated.

Rail: I like to think people are warming back up to that word, learning how to know it. I think it would be healthy, that we crave it.

Berkenblit: I just think there’s something magical about bringing something to life, and that’s why I paint. That’s how I make sense of things, through the absolute thrill of bringing something to life through accidents, through letting the super-ego drop away and letting everything else work: the body, the Id, anything that is arising naturally for me that I’m not thinking too hard about. It’s a state that cannot be sustained for more than a few moments at a time, usually. Nor should it be.

Rail: It’s worth trying to see what we can access when the rational mind gets put in the lesser role. You know, I’ve observed a real prevalence of cartoonish imagery in the work of young painters in recent years that I think is related to this, to the psychological resonance of cartoons. I went through art school in the past five years, and lots of people in our painting department were getting into this very cartoonish imagery; now I’m seeing it in galleries with people like Janiva Ellis, Tanya Ping, Ebecho Muslimova, Adam Amram, Wong Ping (who actually is an animator) and lots more, doing work that evokes cartoons, but without pop references to actual cartoons; not like Jeff Koons. I think its more psychological, psychosexual even. Have you picked up on this at all, or are you interested in any other artists’ practices that intersect with illustration?

Berkenblit: No, I’ve always been as visually drawn to cartoons just as I have been to painting, photos, film, and music. I have to say, I don’t know the work of the people you’ve just named, but I am also not a good judge of what’s going on because I don’t see a lot of shows.

Rail: But you had a strong relationship to cartoons as a young person? You mentioned the black and white TV and Nancy comics.

Berkenblit: Absolutely. I was in love with Astro-Boy, and I wanted to marry Mighty Mouse, you know, when I was very little. They are beautiful, they’re real.

Rail: Of course, there has been a pretty radical shift in your recent work away from the tubular, cartoonish look. Looking at the newer images of the witch, or woman—whoever she is—I think of Giacometti’s sculpture *The Nose*. Her profile is so violently sharp, like a blade. I’m interested in that transition in form.

Berkenblit: It morphed, yes. And by the way, I am always pretty much doing things in profile, no matter what. And that’s something that started when I was a kid. All my drawings were in profile, all my work is in profile and it all tends to face toward the right. But, like a signature, like my name I wrote millions of times, over the years it changes. It got really, really pointy. They’re a little bit softer these days, in the very new work. But yes, I’m glad for that, I think it’s interesting. Sometimes these changes happen overnight, sometimes it’s a slow build-up. But the pointy,

witchy stuff pretty much just happened in one day.

Rail: But in one series of early drawings from the 1990s, you have these young ladies with the very razor-pointy nose too. The girl in those drawings looks like Cinderella or something, she's dressed in rags in these narrative scenes, consorting with mice, and she's stricken with this extreme nose [Laughs]—she's kind of sweet and unsettling. She's much scarier now!

Berkenblit: Yes, she was a little less threatening then.

Rail: The trajectory of this female subject over several decades is interesting. She has developed mythologically within your work, maybe. I like to think that her evolution is something that you're seeing unfold and are surprised by as much as anyone else. Is that right?

Berkenblit: I've often thought of my work as my diary. I don't think it's anything more than that, or rather any different from that. That's not to belittle it, because I think a diary is pretty fucking awesome.

Rail: It's interesting how a diary in most people's understanding is a place for someone's handwriting to express itself, and also for someone's Id or the dark corners of their mind to express themselves.

Berkenblit: Right, because no one is going to read it, hopefully.

Rail: But you've put yours on display.

Berkenblit: Right, like an idiot! [Laughter.]

Rail: Well, it's beautifully coded!

Berkenblit: It is. God knows why I need to put my diary on display, but I love the idea of people seeing my work and for it to provide a platform for their Id, their interpretation, their emotions, their storytelling to themselves. That's another reason that I'm so adamant about the fact that they're not self-portraits, they're not people I know, they're not even specifically cats or women. The profiles are all so interchangeable to me. Yes, they're women, I'm not going to be that difficult about that, but they're not specific women. In the film, when I'm doing the big painting, that arm arch that is shown is pretty much the start of everything. It could become a cat, a woman, a tiger. But that's my entry—the arch.

Rail: A sort of body memory?

Berkenblit: Yes, which I want to give a lot of credit to. I think that's a personal as anyone can get, to put your body to it. You're not going to filter out things when you let your body do something, usually. I think it's exciting to allow oneself to embrace those things, rather than to feel that it's repetitive. I feel like it's obsessive and digging deeper.

Rail: Right, obsession is maybe one of these psychological things that we can let loose when we give up the superego as you've suggested. Another of Freud's ideas is that of

the repetition compulsion—maybe your work has something to do with that; with what one is compelled to repeat and what it means.

Berkenblit: That interests me so greatly . . . actually, to say it interests me makes it sound like I'm outside of it and I'm looking at it objectively. I feel like I'm right in there. Like I said, I have been doing the face in profile forever. The new show that's opening is a drawing show, and is going to have drawings from all different times of my life, including one from 1970, when I was twelve, and it's a profile of a witch. I have been reading Proust's *In Search of Lost Time*, and read a wonderful passage a few weeks ago: "When we have passed a certain age, the soul of the child that we were and the souls of the dead from whom we sprang come and shower upon us their riches and their spells..." Now I'm at this point at my life where I can have the soul of my childhood speak to me, without it being something I'm trying to grow away from. You welcome it back. You've also lost people that you love, and their spirits stay with you and, that treasure comes together in the most beautiful way. I feel like that's where I'm at in my life right now—with these spirits.

Rail: That makes me think of something that my father said—probably only once, but I always recall it—that his ideal of the afterlife, of heaven, is him and everyone he loves, and we're all ten years old.

Berkenblit: Oh, that's beautiful. I think the older you get, the more you realize that you're completely the same person you were at ten. And again, on this idea of losing people, you miss them so much that you yearn for that time when you were together physically, which you appreciate somewhat as a ten-year-old, but there's nothing like looking at that from a later point of your life; it's heaven.

Rail: People often refer to childhood as being the "simpler time," but on the contrary it's all complexity that we just didn't have the scope of experience to grasp at the time. But you can relive it in its full complexity in memory.

Berkenblit: I feel very honored to be doing this new show, to feel connected now with my younger self, but to be able to look at it after enough years have passed that now I can see how everything is still the same in the most fundamental way.

Rail: On the topic of consistency and change, the new show is titled *The Clock Unlocked*. What's the story there? The clock is another image that has, at times, appeared in your work.

Berkenblit: Yes, "*The Clock Unlocked*. . ." all of my titles are words that sound right to me in some way, who knows why. I am also thinking about time. All of my paintings feel like they're about time as individual paintings, but here we're having this span of work over the years. It harkens back to the Proust quote, these spirits coming from different times. I was also thinking of "*Time Gone Wild*," like *Girls Gone Wild* [Laughter.]

Rail: That's a great pairing, Proust and *Girls Gone Wild*!

Berkenblit: So then it became "*The Clock Gone Wild*," and I thought, wait a second, let's get something that's a little tighter than that.

Rail: It's got a great rhythm to it. What else do you read, being a lover of words?

Berkenblit: Actually, for the past year, I have just been reading Proust's *In Search of Lost Time*—The whole seven volumes! [Laughs.] I can't read very quickly because my mind always wanders, as I think most people's do, especially with someone like Proust—it's not exactly a bodice-ripper! You want to read it really slowly and savor it, and also you have to read it really slowly because some of the sentences are so long—it's a state of mind.

Rail: Yes, I remember reckoning with that as a teenager trying out 19th century literature for the first time, thinking it was so incredibly, indulgently boring [Laughs.] And then, of course, coming around to the intentionality of its slowness, and the joys of being put into a pensive or hypnotic state of mind.

Berkenblit: Absolutely. I love that spell that's cast by reading at different paces with different writers.

Rail: Well, it will be interesting to see these different motifs that have carried through your work in the same exhibition space. Are you installing chronologically, or will it all be mixed?

Berkenblit: It's going to be mixed as far as I think right now. That could all change when I'm literally in the space, but my idea is to hang on a gut-basis. It will be a lot of work, about seventy pieces, mostly drawings but some paintings too from the '80s, '90s, and 2000s. All of the work is pretty small, and lots of things that haven't been shown before.

Rail: Are you working on anything new for the show?

Berkenblit: Yes. There is one giant new piece that will take up a whole wall that I've been working on.

Rail: Is it your biggest painting?

Berkenblit: Yes, it's a crazy, long rectangle, 200 inches by 84 inches.

Rail: How has it felt to work on that in those dimensions?

Berkenblit: It's been really exhilarating and fun. Fun is maybe not the word! But exhilarating, nerve-racking. It's a really long, uncomfortable rectangle, not a shape I would naturally choose. Like with the calico pieces, it's about giving myself a puzzle to solve.

Rail: So what are your studio habits like these days, are you there every day? And are you really able to paint every day, or are there times when you're sort of immobilized?

Berkenblit: Yes, pretty much every day. I paint every day I'm in the studio. And the last few years have found me in my studio even more. I feel like that's where the paintings come from; they come from painting. They just do. Let's say I don't get enough sleep and am really tired, I may think it's not a good idea to paint, but then I do. And it's always a good idea.

Rail: You're like an athlete, it's like exercise.

Berkenblit: Yes, it completely is like being an athlete. I don't think of it any differently. I also

think that painting makes painting, and painting makes paintings better, and fucking up makes paintings better. I teach once in a while, and when I taught freshmen I was always really adamant about one thing: they would say they're working on a painting and they like every part of it except this one little part, so they're going to just change that part. And I'm like, "two things:" once you change that part, the rest of the painting is going to change too; and also, don't be don't be afraid to paint over it, even if you think this is so fucking great. They got so scared to fuck up this wonderful thing they had done, and I do it too—like, "oh, that line is so beautiful." It can immobilize the whole painting and you know it, you know it's holding up the whole process but you're...

Rail: Sure, it becomes precious. Perhaps part of the "athleticism" or practice of painting for many years is in convincing yourself that it's okay to ruin it, like getting more comfortable with the fact that one seemingly perfect mark is just one in a thousand million you'll make. I did have a teacher in art school who would scrape down people's work in class for them, saying things like, "Take it out, we don't negotiate with terrorists," or, "This isn't therapy, the painting has to win!" [Laughter.] There was another thing you said about teaching that I liked, in an interview with Jon Kessler. You said you try to remind your students that one doesn't need to be interdisciplinary, that instead you can focus on one thing, and encounter endless possibility and variation within a single medium or a single subject. I think these days, with so many gymnastically interdisciplinary practices all around—and with that sort of practice perhaps being prioritized critically—that's a nice encouragement for students.

Berkenblit: I thoroughly agree with that still. I've used gouache or ink, but I would say seventy percent of my work is done in oil paint, and it always has been, and I just love it more every day. It's surprising always, and it's so humble—it's not a big deal, it's just glop! I like that I can keep finding out ways to make it do things and ways to make it sing. The variables are so great between line and color and texture and everything. It can go on forever.

Rail: And in addition to the consistency of medium, you have this lexicon of images that seem like anchors too. They undergo seemingly endless variation, composition choices, stylistic shifts. Your career seems very grounded in that rhapsody; themes and variations.

Berkenblit: I keep things really simple in terms of that repertoire. I'm really practical.

Rail: [Laughs.] Are you? That's good! We tend to idealize the real eccentrics, but artists that without some degree of practicality are doomed to have a harder time in this life.

Berkenblit: Or they make it work. But I'm a ridiculously practical person.

Notes

John Yau, Hyperallergic. <https://hyperallergic.com/445116/an-artists-film-not-like-the-others/>