

AN ARTIST'S FILM NOT LIKE THE OTHERS, JOHN YAU, HYPERALLERGIC, JUNE 2018.

HYPERALLERGIC

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We watch Ellen Berkenblit drawing. She is left-handed and uses charcoal. She rubs lines out and never looks at the camera.



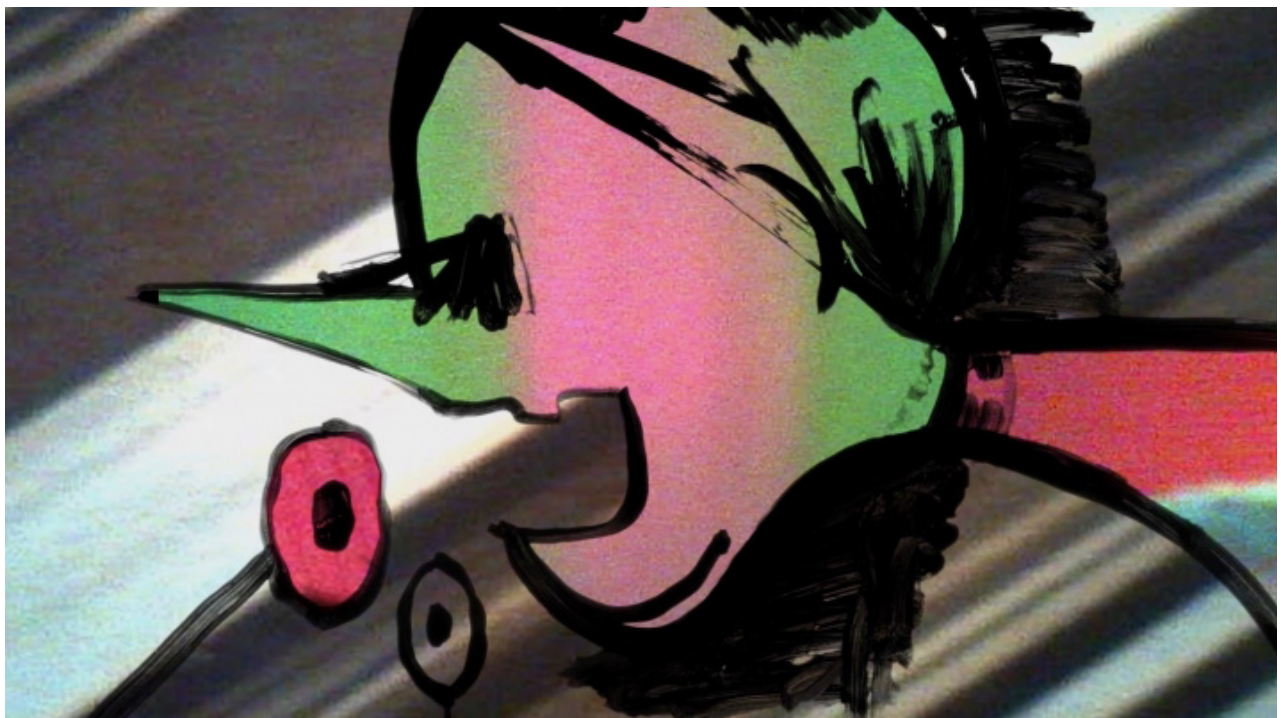
ELLEN BERKENBLIT, FILM STILL FROM "LINES ROAR" (2018), COLOR, 12:21 MINUTES; A FILM BY ELLEN BERKENBLIT IN COLLABORATION WITH DIRECTORS MÓNICA BRAND AND FRANCISCO LOPEZ; ORIGINAL SCORE BY ZEENA PARKINS; ZEENA PARKINS: HARPS / ELECTRONICS / TUNING FORKS; IKUE MORI: ELECTRONICS (ALL IMAGES COURTESY THE DRAWING CENTER)

I have long been indiscriminate, or nearly so, when it comes to movies about or by artists. I even like learning trivia about the many films I have seen, such as the fact that the photographer Edmund Teske, whose work appeared in Wallace Berman's magazine *Semina*, did a cameo as an artist in the Vincent van Gogh biopic *Lust for Life* (1956), directed by Vincente Minelli, and later shot the cover of the Doors' album, *Waiting for the Sun* (1968).

I don't know whether Teske's appearance redeems Minelli's film, but it sure doesn't hurt to know there is something to look for should I wish to watch *Lust for Life* again, though I doubt I will.

I remember seeing *Painters Painting* (1973), directed by Emile de Antonio, at a screening at Harvard shortly after it was released, which further convinced me that I had to move to New York City. Many scenes stick in my mind, including those of Jules Olitski holding his little black dog while the camera follows him around his studio. Why this image is more prominent than others remains a mystery. I also saw the Olitski retrospective that year at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, which may have sealed my resolve to move to New York, which I did soon after.

In recent years, I have watched dozens of documentaries on artists: Lois Dodd, James Castle, Forrest Bess, Frank Auerbach, Paula Rego, Agnes Martin, Phillippe Vandenberg, Elizabeth



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Murray, Donald Judd, Gerhardt Richter, Eva Hesse, Joan Mitchell, Tony Cragg, Thomas Nozkowski, and Norman Bluhm are just a few of the lives I have peered into since the beginning of this century. I have delved into the Hairy Who in Chicago and the Los Angeles art scene of the 1960s. I have even turned up as a talking head in a couple of films, though I have never rewatched any of the ones in which I have appeared, however briefly. This reluctance has nothing with the film's merits.

Most documentaries about artists do the same things: the artist talks; someone who knows the artist talks; the filmmakers take shots of the studio; shots of the work in progress; shots of a finished work. Just as we now expect to be asked if we want flat or sparkling at a restaurant, we

settle into our seats expecting to see certain things in a film of an artist in the studio. Metaphorically and literally, the camera backs up in order to give a wider view of the artist. These are givens, things you take for granted.

Shot in her studio, Ellen Berkenblit did not do the expected in her first film, *Lines Roar* (2018, color, 12:21 min), which the artist made in collaboration with the directors Mónica Brand and Francisco Lopez of Mogollon, with an original sound track by Zeena Parkins. *Lines Roar* is currently playing downstairs at The Drawing Center (through June 10, and then June 27 to August 12).

We see Berkenblit drawing on a large canvas. She is left-handed and uses charcoal. She rubs lines out with her hand and with a cloth. She never looks at the camera.

We see her painting on a pane of glass. We are on the other side, watching her apply black paint with a brush. While these sequences allude to the film *Visit to Picasso* (1949) by Paul Haesaerts and *Jackson Pollock 51* (1951) by Hans Namuth, they did not feel contrived.

In other scenes, a sequence of her painting on glass is superimposed over one in which she draws on a canvas with charcoal. Motifs appear — a cat or pointy-nosed girl — along with cropped views of small works that may or may not have to do with what she is drawing or painting. There are close-ups of cans filled with paintbrushes. There are sequences of her black cat stretching — shot through a red or blue filter — that brought to mind the cat in *Fuses* (1965), Carolee Schneeman's self-shot, silent, collaged film of her and James Tenney making love. This



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was an unexpected association. Berkenblit packs a lot into her short film.

I liked that Berkenblit did not try to make it all add up. She did not tell stories about herself. She did make any grand claims. She did not step outside of what she was doing (working) to explain what she was up to. At the same time, she was not trying to be oblique, which is another clichéd way of trying to look profound. This is a home movie.

There are black-and-white photographs of her mother and father as well as footage taken by the artist in her studio and home. In all of these sequences, the camera never backs up to give us a broader view: it does not pan the studio, and never more than a partial view of an in-progress painting is visible. *Lines Roar* is instead a series of what Willem de Kooning would have called “slipping glimpses.” And that is what held my attention.



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Ellen Berkenblit: Lines Roar is on view at The Drawing Center (35 Wooster Street, Soho, Manhattan) through June 10 and from June 27 to August 12.