



ARTIFACTS | BAT-SUGAR BOMBSHELL



COURTESY OF ANTON KERN GALLERY, NEW YORK ELLEN BERKENBLIT'S "PINK VELVET" (2011).

She's the life of the party and she's going bats. Her golden hair fanning out in the wind and ribbons — or are they cocktail straws? rivulets of blood? — flying from her mouth, she kicks up her heels and heads into the dark, dive-bombing the target of her vampire's kiss.

Part cartoon heroine, part femme fatale, this long-lashed, nameless beauty of the night has bedeviled the artist Ellen Berkenblit for most of her 54 years. In her latest exhibition at the Anton Kern Gallery (Berkenblit's sixth since 1999 and her most assured to date), the character is once again the artist's sole subject, only she has never looked more bewitching or her portraits more lush.

She also looks vaguely like Berkenblit, who admits she has a thing for bats. Not only do her paintings have titles like "I Draw Blood" and "Ghastly Charmer," but they're so aggressively executed that they come at the viewer in a seductively predatory rush.

"I'm not sure what bats represent to me," Berkenblit said the other day, admitting that she thinks of them like imaginary pets. "Maybe it's the nighttime, because that's when I think the best. It's where I dwell."

Actually, Berkenblit lives in Brooklyn, with the film producer Josh Astrachan, her husband of the last three years. (Once associated with the director Robert Altman, his latest movie is "Friends with Kids.") His name gave her the title of one new painting, "Yours Truly, Frankenstein Astrachan," but it's more like a love letter than one signed with a poison pen.

In that purple-hued painting, her needle-nosed character has bright green hair, while the pink ribbons in her mouth are tying themselves into a bow. "I like when things tie," Berkenblit said. "A bow or a tie is a line that got twisted."

Her paintings have a visceral buoyancy that stems from their slashing streaks of parrotlike color and radiating lines of hair — touch points that move the viewer through the moonlit world of each painting. But Berkenblit always starts with her obsessive character's distinctive profile, one that she has been

drawing since her childhood in Westchester County, N.Y., where she first developed a crush on her future husband.

“I fell in love with him when we were 13 and he was a leprechaun in a high school production of ‘Finian’s Rainbow’ and painted green all over,” she said. “But I was afraid to speak to him then.” As an adult, she had relationships with other men but never stopped thinking about that leprechaun.

Eight years ago, Astrachan saw one of her shows at the Kern gallery and called her up. Altman was planning a movie about the art world, and Astrachan wanted an interview. They talked over dinner at the Odeon, and though the movie never came to be, they have been together ever since.

If Altman was her Cupid, Frankenstein has become the driving force behind Berkenblit’s work. “He’s what I think painting is all about,” she said. “Taking all these elements — crescents, stars, ribbons, legs, hair — and making them live and breathe on the canvas.”

Her vibrant color sense does that, too. She says that seeing them together creates a taste in her mouth that comes out in the ribbons of her paintings. One of them, “Striper,” combines mustard yellow, lime green, hot pink and black. It’s also the only canvas in her show that pictures her favorite witch with her eyes open. Most others are all about her eyelashes — feathery curtains over downcast eyes that make the character seem more demure than dangerous. A few dispense with the profile altogether and concentrate on her shoes, mostly to convey her determined, I’m-gonna-get-you step.

Of the lot, the teeth-baring creature with the deep green complexion in “Ellie Greenwich” is the most vampiric. Greenwich was the co-author of huge 1960s pop songs like the Ronettes’ “Be My Baby” and the Shangri-Las’ “Leader of the Pack.” Those girl groups, Berkenblit said, marked her sexual awakening, and those songs are still in her head. “There’s something primal in that music,” she said. “I’m listening to music when I’m painting and I think of painting like songwriting. They reduce the human condition to the most basic chords, yet they’re incredibly powerful.”

With their economy of line and emotion, cartoons do that too. “To me it’s all calligraphy,” Berkenblit said. “So simple yet fraught with meaning.”

“Ellen Berkenblit” continues through March 31 at the Anton Kern Gallery, 532 West 20th Street.