

# Frieze

## Reviews

ELLEN BERKENBLIT



A LARGE GROUP OF BATS, 2012, OIL AND CHARCOAL ON LINEN

Beautiful girls with special powers have been known to sport green hair before – in Isabel Allende’s magical realist novel *La casa de los espíritus* (*The House of the Spirits*, 1982), for instance. In Ellen Berkenblit’s new body of work, it is one of the uncanny attributes of the revamped protagonist who, in different guises, has walked beside the New York-based artist for much of her career, since she started showing her work in the mid-1980s. The cartoonish likeness of the artist in this new bewitching guise first appeared on the scene two years ago, when Berkenblit moved to her new studio and started painting afresh.

On the face of it, at least, the character is in every way opposed to her former self, just as the colourful, glow-in-the-dark paintings in which she features form a contrast to the black and white series previously displayed at Anton Kern in 2008. In place of the wide-eyed, gape-mouthed and button-nosed girl from the previous series, who wore a uniformly startled and melancholy expression, we have the green-haired creature with her made-up eyes wide shut, thinly drawn lips and an emphatically pointed nose – by turns demure, winsome, reckless and wild. Berkenblit subjects her creation to endless shape-shifting (from the débutante in *Ghastly Charmer* to the femme fatale of *Miss R*, both 2012, right down to the old hag of *I Draw Blood*, 2011), and revels in her infinite variety.

The character comes into the picture head- or foot-first (both seen in profile better to reveal her elongated neck or deep instep), gingerly at first, then more resolutely, before she unleashes her unbridled energy with something approximating ecstatic frenzy. Titles, such as *Later That Night* (2012), suggest some kind of linear progression in this group of 20 paintings, placed side by side like so many cinematic frames or cartoon transparencies, admittedly of wildly differing sizes (no two canvases are alike in this respect), to form a motion picture. Yet taken as a whole, the series resists any attempts at projecting a single narrative. Rather, individual paintings, or groups of two to four, hung close together or apart, function as discrete narrative segments, as in *Miss R* (2012) and *The Umbrella and the Watch* (2011), whose stark palette of blues, reds, blacks and greens recalls Matisse's *Danse* and is later echoed in *Green Streamer* (2011).

Named after a passage in Marcel Proust's *Swann's Way* (1913), in which the narrator pours scorn on these two 'pernicious (besides being quite bleakly bourgeois) implements', *The Umbrella and the Watch* is the one painting on view in which our beguiling-cum-threatening heroine does not figure. In her stead, we have a green half-moon outlined with black against a blue-green background, as if in a clumsily executed collage, poised above a house; half of it, daubed in pastel colours, evokes a gingerbread hut from Baba Yaga tales; a bright red-blue arch that could pass for a rainbow, in the right-hand bottom corner, is there not merely for its fairytale resonances but as a structuring gesture – the sweep of the painter's arm – framing the picture from within.

The technique at work in these dark paintings, made up of layers on layers of richly textured paint – patiently applied only to be stripped away, revealing hidden depths of often lurid, acidic colour – calls to mind scratch boards covered with wax and coated over with black that children scrape off. For Berkenblit, the process of taking paint away is part of the painting. There is no such thing as an ugly colour; it simply needs to be conjured into speaking.