

Frieze

Reviews

ELLEN BERKENBLIT



For 'Batsugar von Frankenstein', her second solo show at Anton Kern, Ellen Berkenblit exhibited 23 small paintings on paper and seven large paintings on expanded aluminium and perforated metal. The larger works were each constructed out of several lattice panels, which she stuck together and laid on top of one another to form, in her word, 'clusters'. Like Frankenstein's monster, Berkenblit's paintings are made up of fragments from other bodies, woven into different combinations and settings. In place of canvas, the artist employs metal grilles, a material so frequently seen in any metropolis that it often escapes notice.

Berkenblit's drawings are an arsenal of deft charm. Puddles of inky columns and delicate lines depict a whole host of enchanted creatures. Friendly but morose animals - quadruped grasshoppers, butterflies supporting fuzzy tom-cats, cuddly little melancholy bears, a personable mouse and a Beano adolescent happily spreadeagled atop a floating hot air balloon - emerge from rich washes of paint. An occasionally chic, occasionally shabby, female character resembling Pinocchio appears in most of the images.

It seems natural to view the 'clusters' as larger, more complex illustrations of the fairytale-

like narratives alluded to in the drawings. The same characters pop up in the larger paintings, though they are more difficult to identify. This is where the drawings start operating as a sort of key or legend. Some of the Kandinsky-esque abstractions in the paintings are actually recurring characters distributed around the frames like motifs in a musical score.

The title of *Sir Peacock and the Falcon* (2003) reads like a tale by the brothers Grimm. Floating within a landscape of neon hieroglyphics and architectural recesses is the cute, pointy-nosed mouse that appears elsewhere, but his companion looks more like a dove than a falcon. The rendering of both figures is so basic that they resemble a graffiti artist's signature tag. That such a reductive mouse should be called Sir Peacock follows a topsy-turvy logic, although the world he inhabits is certainly flamboyant enough. In the four-panel cluster of *Lionel's Happy Ending* (2003) a shaggy lion/melting Pooh bear chats with Sir Peacock. In the bottom left panel the faintly visible female protagonist appears more as a narrator than a character. The milky smooth application of enamel sits in counterpoint to the caustic, drippy spray paint. Softened down, the painted metallic lattices begin to resemble a hallucinogenic broderie anglaise.

Our heroine emerges in *A Day on Blueberry Street* (2003) as a bundle of dainty nervousness. Glancing over her shoulder, she is frozen mid-stride in a primordial soup of bold markings and empty speech bubbles. From a distance *The Clouds over Spider Boulevard* (2003) looks like a few plasma screens joined together, the punched holes creating a pixelated pastel surface. This effect is also present in *Traffic* (2003), where the female protagonist is staged somewhere between the floating advertisements of *Blade Runner* (1982) and the magnified pages of a comic book. Assembled in the they are, the overlapping panels make for a gauzy depth of field. As a visual experience, it's not dissimilar to wandering about town looking at cityscapes through layers of chain-link fences and building sites.