



Ellen Berkenblit  
*Mike's Norton*  
2007  
Anton Kern Gallery



Ellen Berkenblit  
*Heart Shaped*  
2007  
Anton Kern Gallery



## SUGAR SHOCK

by Adrian Dannatt

Ellen Berkenblit, Jan. 17-Feb. 23, 2008, at Anton Kern Gallery, 532 West 20th Street, New York, N.Y. 10011

With her artistic debut as part of the East Village milieu in the early 1980s, the New York artist Ellen Berkenblit was arguably the first "girl-painter" to emerge with the kind of overtly gendered and subversively sweet style that now characterizes a swath of other, excessively popular women artists. A quarter century later, she is ably demonstrating that advantages accrue to a seasoned artist *d'un certain age* and that risky issues of female beauty, of painterly beauty, can be ideally combined with maturity.

Her recent exhibition at Anton Kern Gallery consisted of 11 large canvases depicting in consistent black-and-white the profile of a woman who is clearly *not* a physical ideal, most obviously due to a snub nose so protrusive and dominant it shocks. This same woman occupies each painting and her expression remains constant. Along with big round button eyes and a dark circular *bouche* is that outrageously upturned nose, something like a baby's pacifier or a jigsaw puzzle promontory, or perhaps some sort of phallic plug.

By practical standards of contemporary beauty this is precisely the sort of nose that looks to cosmetic surgery for redemption (and so in its present state signifies a sense of stubborn, old-fashioned integrity). Its artistic precursor in this regard would be Andy Warhol's *Before and After*, his 1960 diptych devoted to an advertisement for a nose job. Similarly, an affinity can be seen between Berkenblit's suite of new paintings and the "hand-painted-Pop" of early '60s Warhol. An overt comparison could be made with Warhol's painting *Popeye*, also from 1960, a sketchy version of a cartoon panel whose white star shapes are so very similar to the stars that are a dominant motif of these Berkenblit paintings.

Indeed, one could even imagine that Berkenblit's paintings are a specific response to that specific Warhol work, replacing Popeye with a figure who could well be Olive Oyl in her own flip-book cartoon complete with stars.

An artist's mature style often has a curious affinity with the art that was being produced during her childhood, and so it would be with Berkenblit and hand-painted Pop. The pleasingly artful artlessness, the casual traces of the brush, the throwaway evidence of each stage of the painting, smudges and charcoal outlines, the spontaneous accidents of gravity and grace, they are all there.

Though the oil paint is laid flat and thin, it has many tonal variations and subtleties. Berkenblit's seemingly simple blackness has patches of gloss which catch the light. It holds subtler shades of gray and even,

**Ellen Berkenblit**  
*Bitesville*  
2007  
Anton Kern Gallery



**Ellen Berkenblit**  
*Shetland Pony*  
2007  
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Ellen Berkenblit at Anton Kern Gallery, installation view



**Ellen Berkenblit**  
*T-Mouse*  
2007  
Anton Kern Gallery

when you look harder, traces of bruised yellow, pinkish purple, a white-tinted blue. Like the scumbled tonal range hidden in Ryman's whites, or the smeared variants of gray deployed by Berkenblit's longtime friend Christopher Wool, these paintings graduate their apparent naiveté to a sophisticated casualness. In their kooky sprezzatura and use of restricted tones, too, these works could be paired with the impressive black-and-white paintings of Carroll Dunham.

As a series the paintings have a potency that is cumulative as well as singular, the mystery of this woman and her mission building as the canvases doggedly march around the gallery walls in a horizontal progression that has the effect of a crude animation. We can't help but see these works as a plotted sequence, stuttered motion. In some we see our heroine in entire outline, her clothes and accessories, in others it is just her face that looms into close-up, always in profile.

Our leading lady appears entirely alone in each painting, all of which date from 2007, save for one, the most recent, in which her image is doubled and which dates from 2008. Like an artist in her studio, alone, who finally meets her alter ego. Who is this figure whose features are both different from and similar to the artist's own? Is she a childhood emblem of adult existence, that vague human fiction that is as emotionally real as life can be?

And what of the unusual titles chosen for these works, titles which are extremely different despite the seeming similarity of the actual paintings, titles such as *Ballroom Blitz*, *Werewolf Avenue*, *Shetland Pony*, *Dr. Spleen*, or *T-Mouse*? Such labels hint at the comic aspects of these paintings, whose central character surely demands our amused sympathy despite her ambiguity, her strangeness. For she ports an suggestive ensemble, the hint of shiny, creaky black leather or perhaps even rubber, complete with long gloves and veil, a Fairy Tale maid retro-fitted by a fetishist, Little Red Riding Hood as Dominatrix, a blushing bride both victim and *dame sans merci* emerging from a very dark wood she may well rule.

This figure might have come straight from Bruno Bettelheim and his *Uses of Enchantment*, a fictional embodiment of sexuality among our apparent innocence, a figural focus for us to follow throughout this bravura demonstration of painting for its own sake, an abstraction of attraction and its necessary opposite.

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