

Bernhardt Over Los Angeles

Katherine Bernhardt's mural teases out tensions between the art establishment, market agendas and a changing Downtown Los Angeles. by Catherine Wagley



When Venus Over Manhattan, the Upper East Side gallery run by financier Adam Lindemann, opened its Los Angeles satellite, it painted its new Downtown LA building Pepto-Bismol pink. Since the gallery's New York building was gray and right next to the uptown space of blue chip giant, Gagostian Gallery, Venus Over Los Angeles, located in an industrial district new to the art world right beneath a condemned bridge, felt very much like the art establishment's attempt at pioneering. Their building was a target for graffiti and tagging early on, according to artists who worked on the same street, called Anderson St. It became less of a target after July 2015, however, when the gallery commissioned painter Katherine Bernhardt to paint the mural *Fruit Salad* on the building's north face. It includes blunt, ham-fisted cigarettes that swim amid toucans and tropical fruit—bananas and cut-open papayas. Pink and purple figure prominently. It would be attractively impudent in smoother locations, but in a rough stretch of a rapidly changing downtown, where residents already fear that traces of a long industrial history will be erased, it's harder to read the mood. Is its intentional "dumbness"—Bernhardt has used "dumb" in exhibition titles before—feeding into the stereotype of LA as flimsy La La Land? Or is it refusing to bow to stiff notions of art's import?

In September 2015, Jerry Saltz wrote an article in *New York* magazine decrying the marginalization of Bernhardt and other "bad boy female artists" (he did not call them "bad girls"). Less than a month later, Bernhardt's whole show at Carl Freedman Gallery in London sold out. Paintings ranged in price from \$8,000 to

\$50,000. But, as Saltz notes, though she has been painting and showing for over 15 years, she hasn't been included in any major institutional exhibitions. She wasn't in Documenta. She wasn't in MoMA's "The Forever Now" survey of 21st-century painting (on Instagram, she posted a photo of herself holding up her middle finger in front of that exhibition's introductory wall text, joining a chorus of artists who took issue with the show). In Bernhardt's case, the establishment and the market seem to be at odds.

Maybe the textures and idiosyncrasies of Bernhardt's work butt up against "norms" of contemporary practice. Maybe her attitude—a devil-may-care offhandedness combined with respect for pattern—keeps her from being seen as "serious," even as it appeals to buyers. New York-based Bernhardt, who wore heart-shaped sunglasses and used clipped sentences when interviewed by *W Magazine* in 2008, spent the first decade of her career painting garish portraits of fashion models. Kate Moss would have dark, thick, dripping mascara; Natalia Vodianova might have damp-looking eyes, purple lips, and impossibly skinny arms. Then, about three years ago, Bernhardt abruptly shifted gears, making flatter, tapestry-like paintings of consumer goods. Doritos and Coke cans, hamburgers, cigarettes, and socks coexisted, hovering on canvas against sloppily colored-in backgrounds. There was no depth at all, no hint of shadow.

Early on in this new phase, Bernhardt and her husband, Youssef Jdia, collaborated on a show called "Holiday Services" at the Hole in New York. Jdia had been in the studio, watching his wife and their son



when he started pinning or pasting different objects onto her in-progress paintings. The paintings started looking a lot like the rugs he sold and traded for a living. So they included Berber rugs in the exhibition too, staking them on the floor. Sometimes, Bernhardt and Idia would sit on the rug piles, their son and other children playing nearby. Photos of the exhibition have a clubby casualness, as does the press release, which describes the Moroccan Idia as someone who "does not consider himself an 'artist'... but says: 'I felt happy making the collages and that it was a good experience.'" It also references the reggae, reggaeton, soca, and gospel music that plays outside Bernhardt's Flatbush studio, before describing her as a "celebrated contemporary artist." Her status as an artist seemed secondary to the social mood.

The weekend the mural at Venus Over Los Angeles debuted, in late July 2015, the gallery introduced it with a barbecue. Or, rather, a taco party, where guests drank Tecate and horchata and sat at picnic tables. That weekend, I accidentally showed up a day early, on Saturday, to find the alley behind Venus Over Los Angeles mostly empty and completely empty of art people. The mural was there, but looking out of place on its own. Sunday afternoon, I was back, eating tacos and talking with artists about criminally low-paying arts non-profits and the art industry's role in gentrification. All the while, a small crowd congregated outside the barbecue, non-invited passersby at least as intrigued by the vibe of the event as the artwork. The mural looked much more itself this way, surrounded by activity, and coolly tinged by that insider-outsider dynamic. Bernhardt's painted cigarettes were key that day; their ash-covered ends all face west, toward the country's outermost edge, more pessimistic than aspirational. They contrast the fruit and birds around them, putting a damper on the festive mood.

In the weeks after the mural debuted, some critics took Venus Over Los Angeles to task for its PR. The gallery's press release called *Fruit Salad* Bernhardt's "first foray" into mural creation and a "prelude" to her New York show. It also said that the open industrial environment of Downtown Los Angeles was clearly ideal for Bernhardt's "bold style." Downtown LA became the empty canvas and the place to test out an artist new to a big Manhattan gallery. In a lengthy Facebook thread initiated by art writer Carol Cheh, artists and writers wondered if the mural was an attempt to regulate public space, to control downtown's unruliness using art as a tool. In one artist's words, was the mural "a wrapping paper used to cover up the complexities of a community"? Certainly, it would have seemed more honest had the gallery framed *Fruit Salad* as a way of staking claim to a changing environment neither the gallerists nor artist understood quite yet. But businesses, art businesses included, tend not to be self-aware in such ways, and the desired promotional narratives commonly obfuscate the more provocative realities.

Before Bernhardt transitioned to compositions of foodstuff and commodities, I would have associated her with Elizabeth Peyton and Karen Kilimnik, artists who take a watery, stylized approach to celebrity and frequently approximate its glossy mag aesthetic. It can be hard to tell whether they're guiltily deifying mainstream ideas

of glamour or whether they're criticizing by cannibalizing—that blurriness is part of their appeal.

After her approach shifted, Bernhardt aligned with a different kind of girl's club, a group of well-educated women who don't seem that interested in appearing art-smart (though they are). Laura Owens, Mari Eastman, Rebecca Morris, Allison Miller, Mary Weatherford, and sometimes Dana Schutz might belong to this group. They aren't "bad boy female artists" because bad boys of the past (Pollock, Chamberlain, and, later, Schnabel or Baselitz) and present (Sterling Ruby, Dan Colen, Nate Lowman, etc.) express confidence in a more entitled way—Colen's brazen gum paintings or Schnabel's smashed plate assemblages, for example. Yet, like those boys, they paint in a way that suggests they don't need permission. They can be loosely abstract, and borrow easily from craft, pop, and expressionism. They can also be sentimental and sweet, if they so choose. Or even bullheaded. "There's no limit as to what the work is referencing," Laura Owens said in a 2003 interview, then went on to talk about how she had no shame in being grandiose or ridiculous, and about how commingling disturbs purists who prefer clear transitions and historical lineages.

Bernhardt refused to justify the pronounced change in her work during a January 2015 interview with Ashley Garrett for *Whitehot Magazine*. Instead she cited the quirky 2002 film *Adaptation*, in which the orchid-obsessed Susan Orlean character, played by Meryl Streep, questions the orchid thief John Laroche about the various interests he's thrown himself into over the years.

For a long time, Laroche collected turtles. Then he stopped. Asks Orlean, "If you really loved something, wouldn't a little bit of it linger...?"

Laroche replies, "Look I'll tell you a story, 'right. I once fell deeply, you know, profoundly in love with tropical fish. Had sixty god-damn fish tanks in my house. I skin-dived to find just the right ones. *Anasiltriumus virginicus*, paulcanfaciliers, traiderdon caprostratus, you name it, then one day I say, fuck fish. I renounce fish. I vow never to set foot in that ocean again, that's how much fuck fish."

"But why?" Orlean asks.

"Done with fish," Laroche replies. Bernhardt goes on to describe seeing some graffiti one day near Union Square that included a popsicle, a watermelon, and a dollar sign and wanting to do something like that, combine a graffiti aesthetic and

foodstuff, and maybe also tropes from the Moroccan rugs her husband had been selling.

She had her first solo show of work in this vein at Canada Gallery in March 2014, "Stupid, Crazy, Ridiculous, Funny Patterns," in which hamburgers and basketballs featured in one painting. Computer screens, laptops, and pizza slices featured in another. She titled each after what it contained. *Smoke* depicts stacks of cigarettes. The items are intentionally spaced. Bernhardt has clear control over her canvas, and so messiness of the marks reads as strategic affectation—"stupid" becomes a skill. She's involved in a balancing act, conveying the unhealthy danger of the objects she paints, while still owning her version of crudeness.

The loosely abstract girls' club has growing prominence in downtown Los Angeles. With the support of Gavin Brown, painter Laura Owens runs a space near Venus Over Los Angeles, 356 Mission, where a show of Rebecca Morris' work recently came down. Bernhardt's mural will be up indefinitely, a silent witness while rents downtown rise exponentially as developers jump on what they perceive as an art-scene bandwagon, while a cleaned-up version of the industrial aesthetic gradually takes hold. It's frustrating to think of Bernhardt's *Fruit Salad* as part of the cleaning up, though certainly it exists because big galleries began to find Downtown Los Angeles appealing. It's more useful if the commingling of sensibilities—the crudeness and flatness of Bernhardt's aesthetic, and the defacing that will likely occur as the mural remains—could be part of a story about the mess that inevitably ensues when a culture industry inserts itself into an area with a different history. This story runs parallel to the story of Bernhardt's success: her quick shifts, mixed references, and on-purpose dumbness, both a boon for the business of art and a respite from art's self-aggrandizing seriousness. ■

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OPPOSITE BELOW, Pool painting by Katherine Bernhardt for *Artax Projects: Nautilus*, photo by Silvia Ros for Artxy

ABOVE, Katherine Bernhardt, *Fruit Salad*, 2015, photo by Josh White

BELOW, Chris Cooper in *Adaptation*, 2002

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