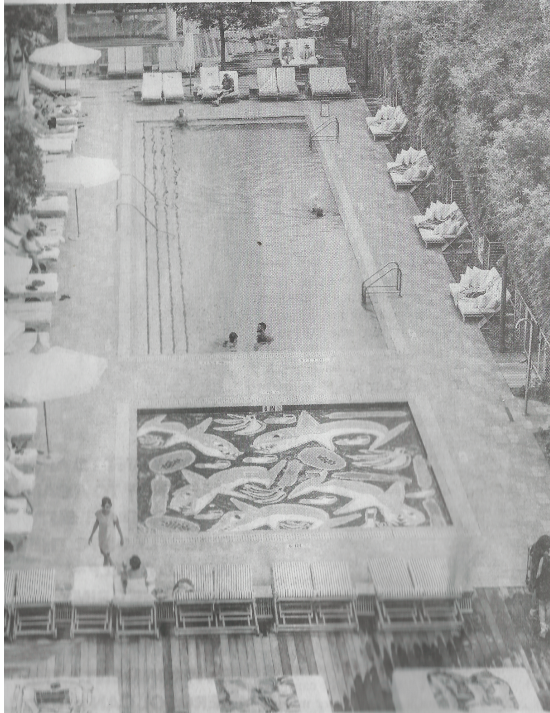


Bernhardt Over Los Angeles

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, Gagosian 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 Jdia 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 Jdia 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 sec-

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

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

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