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Ellen Berkenblit

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The witch is an independent. She operates in opposition to cultural constructs, rejecting the status quo by effectively defining herself within her own terms, her own system of beliefs. The witch is an emancipated woman, a figure who defines herself as powerful, studious, and dedicated to her craft.

The motif of the witch, with her elongated neck, nose and bushy lashes, appears again within this collection of Ellen Berkenblit's latest paintings and drawings. For this exhibition – her first European solo presentation in almost 20 years and first at rodolphe janssen – the artist continues to explore the varied forms that have occupied her over the course of her 30-year career, combining her obsession with the materiality of painting and mark-making processes as they are diligently applied to paper, linen and sutured calico. Flat shapes describe a conjuring of sorts, a gestural process and systematic calligraphy that allude to additional forms such as the female nude, tigers, lions, stiletto shoes and now most recently, and never before exhibited, automobiles.

The various guises from this motley crew of characters are worn by the artist's signature calligraphic marks, and continually applied to the readings of Berkenblit's gestural abstraction. The content of these motifs is just as elusive as the figures the viewer projects onto the canvas: are they a myth? Although the surface of Berkenblit's painting can seem to speak to a graphic sense of animation or cartoon, her gestures are defined completely by an intuitive process. Rather than pulling from reference material, her shapes, compositions and textures formulate the artist's iconography and her craft. They may evoke a similar technique to illustrative rendering, however they do not situate themselves within the constellations of cartooning.

Each part of the composition is an ingredient in the concoction of the painting itself. One shape may begin with a semblance of a tiger, then mutate into a witch, whose profile could transform into a horse with the eye of that horse resulting in the final articulation as the wheel of a truck. Our relationship with the immediacy of graphic language allows the interpretation of these shapes as recognizable forms. What may look like a sequence of letters are merely shapes defined by the edges of a brushstroke, much like the act of penning letters. Berkenblit's industrious techniques provides a generous road map for the viewer to traverse with their eyes, endowing them with the agency to create meaning through the artist's intuitive gesture, from real into imaginary.

About the artist :

Ellen Berkenblit (born in 1958 in Paterson, New Jersey) received her BFA from Cooper Union, New York, in 1980 and currently lives and works in Brooklyn, New York.

In 2014 she was a recipient of a Guggenheim Fellowship for exceptional creative ability in the arts. Recent presentations of Berkenblit's work were held at the Museum of Modern Art, Whitney Museum, Anton Kern Gallery & Gladstone Gallery (New York); Museum of Contemporary Art (Chicago); Hall Art Foundation (Vermont); Susanne Vielmetter Los Angeles Projects & Various Small Fires (Los Angeles); Centre Pompidou (Paris); Brand New Gallery (Milan); National Museum of Women in the Arts (Washington DC); and many more.

The artist's work is included in public collections such as the Aspen Art Museum (Aspen); the Brooklyn Museum (Brooklyn); Cincinnati Art Museum (Cincinnati); Farnsworth Art Museum (Rockland); Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago (Chicago); Museum of Contemporary Art (Los Angeles); Museum of Modern Art (New York) and the Whitney Museum of American Art (New York).