

# SLEEK

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## Pizza! Capri Sun! Cigarettes! Katherine Bernhardt On Her Love For Pop Culture



Image: Portrait of Katherine Bernhardt. Photo: Christopher Schoonover

New York painter Katherine Bernhardt discusses her love for all things pop culture, and Moroccan vibes in Brooklyn.

Katherine Bernhardt makes large gestural paintings. Using acrylic and spray paint, her art depicts representational elements from society, ranging from models in glossy magazines to extinguished cigarettes discarded on sidewalks. Early works were composed of lanky bodies

splayed across the canvases, all high cheek bones and wide eyes. Considering they were made by a painter from Missouri in the early 2000s, they seemed surprisingly yet absolutely tribal — unruly even. Since then, Bernhardt has continued to develop this style. For her 2010 show at Canada in New York's Lower East Side, she turned the gallery into a souk featuring Moroccan rugs woven in uncharacteristically bright garish colours, and has recently begun using objects such as Sharpie markers, tacos and sneakers in her paintings, as seen at her 2014 exhibition, "Stupid, Crazy, Ridiculous Funny Patterns", which was also hosted at Canada. Bernhardt's studio is in a multi-ethnic part of Brooklyn, just now feeling the effects of gentrification. Outside her studio window you can see flags from Jamaica, Guinea, Ghana, Senegal and Algeria. Inside, some of her paintings resemble versions of the neighbourhood she lives in, distorted by her vibrant, often naive style. Recently, New York Magazine critic Jerry Saltz named Stupid, Crazy, Ridiculous Funny Patterns one of the best exhibitions of 2014, while "New American Paintings" publisher, Steven Zevitas, named her one of the artists to watch in 2015. With a strong presence in national and international art fairs as well as in the realm of social media, Katherine Bernhardt's unique style is finally getting the recognition it deserves.

*Sleek: When did you switch from painting figures to objects?*

Katherine Bernhardt: Well, it started with the giant paintings that were part of the "Super Models and Swatch Watches" exhibition I did in Madrid in 2009, which I continued in 2010. They were based on actual Swatch watches from the Nineties. After Swatches, I did paintings of Moroccan carpets. All of the work is about obsession and popular culture. It was about seeing those rugs in Morocco and seeing the colour combinations, then trying to make a painting about them. After that, I made some collages about Flatbush in Brooklyn, depicting carnivals, thrift stores and different patterns I'd see. From these collages, I arrived at the object paintings that you can see in Stupid, Crazy, Ridiculous Funny Patterns, which are also based on my love of African fabrics and pattern, design, popular culture and graffiti.

*How do you know which objects will work best?*

Sometimes I don't! For example, I hated the first object in this series. It was a green smiley face and it was kind of a mess so I put it to one side. However, when I showed it to people everyone seemed to love it, which challenged me, and got me thinking; it is actually when I decided to use things I see in everyday life such as deli items, pizza, hamburgers, coffee, tea, bagels, cheese and ice cream. When I was an undergraduate at the Art Institute of Chicago, all I did was paint objects, so it feels like things have come full circle.

*Are there any artists that have particularly influenced this direction?*

Claes Oldenburg's work is something I've always been able to relate to. I love Chris Ofili, Alex Katz, and Egyptian hieroglyphics. I see my work as modern day hieroglyphics. The way Phillip Guston painted cigarettes has also been a big inspiration. I guess I just like "painterly" painters.

*Going back to pizza art: have you heard Macaulay Culkin's band The Pizza Underground? They cover songs by The Velvet Underground but change the words so that each song is about pizza. It kind of reminds me of how you use pizza as an object too. Maybe they would make a good accompaniment to some of your work...*

That's funny! I'm all about pop culture and love images that you'd see on a poster hanging outside a deli. Some of my work has a retro quality – old Apple computers, rotary telephones, boom boxes. Even my most recent solo show at Canada had a retro feel to it, with Capri Sun juice boxes and old Seventies style vans people used to drive. Each of the objects that are retro but are also very contemporary.

*Can you talk about how you choose colours for your paintings?*

When I first started making this series, I wanted to use the most obnoxious colour combinations possible. But now, in the last two years, it's evolved. Lately, I'm really into black, and black backgrounds, and also mixing two colours in the background, like purple and yellow. All the colour choices are intuitive.

*Do you think you'll ever go back to making paintings based on Moroccan rugs?*

Yes. All of those paintings were made with my husband, Youssef Jdia, who is Moroccan. Working together was fun and I was able to think differently about placement and space – things I wouldn't have thought about on my own. Youssef is also a carpet seller and has an entirely different way of thinking about rugs since he's been around them his whole life, it's like carpet design is in his brain. We initially began making them using the old canvas scraps I had lying around the studio. We started layering and worked in a way similar to Matisse and his cut-outs. That series basically happened because we were all hanging out in the studio together. We recently sold three of those works to the US Embassy in Rabat, the capital of Morocco. It's the perfect way to merge Moroccan and American cultures.

*You've also sold actual rugs at art fairs. How do you sell them? Do people need to buy multiple rugs or can they buy just one?*

They can buy as many as they want! Or they can even acquire the entire booth. NADA New York is coming up and we are going to do an all white booth for spring 2015.

*Do you think you will ever return to making images with figures, or was your early interest in people just an excuse to make a painting?*

I guess it was both. It was all about Kate Moss and Gisele and other models. I made a whole collection of paintings based on Kate Moss and had a show in Stockholm called "Kiss Me Kate" in 2007. Someone once asked me "Who's going to be your next obsession?" and I said, "Well, it doesn't have to be a person, it can be a thing." And I guess that came true.