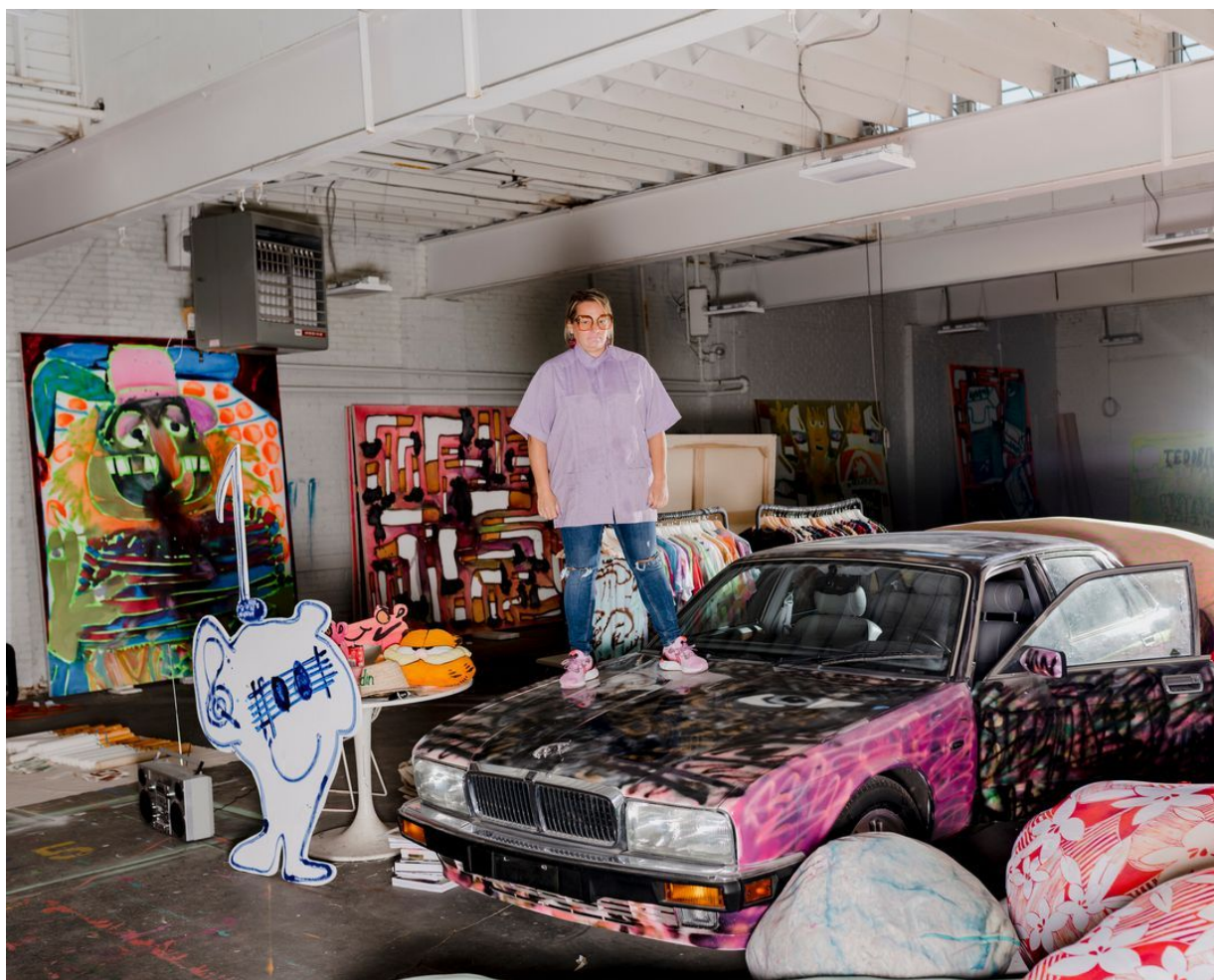


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In the studio with Katherine Bernhardt. Words by Alex Leav.



Like her paintings, Katherine Bernhardt is as enigmatic as she is direct. On a FaceTime call with me from her warehouse studio in St. Louis, she is colorful – both figuratively and literally, wearing frosted pink 80s-esque lipstick and a multicolored tie-dyed tee shirt – and energetic, eager to virtually take me on a tour of the space (which, funnily and fittingly, has no Wi-Fi). She laughs and shrugs when asked questions about her work, giving quite blunt, amusing answers. Bernhardt's paintings are surely an extension of herself: refreshingly fun, lighthearted, and

humorous. Or, perhaps, Bernhardt is an extension of her paintings. The artist has become a household name, a "brand" not different from the ones she paints. Her work, which records a contemporary consumer-oriented, product-obsessed culture, is relevant and important, her creativity undeniable and admirable.

I recently read about your childhood home, where you now live with your son, parents, sister, and niece, is a mishmash of colours, maximalist patterns, stacked storage boxes, piles of stuffed animals, figurines, antiques, and other miscellaneous objects. You grew up surrounded by lots of *stuff*. How do you think this impacted your painting?

Being surrounded by tons of stuff is very annoying. I had to learn how to use the little space that I had. For example, chopping up vegetables on a cutting board next to a million other things in the way, or trying to cook surrounded by stuff everywhere. It is very annoying! On the other hand, it photographs really well and if you ever need anything, we probably have it.

By the way, I recently bought my own house, so I can have my own space. Check it out on Instagram, @5725lindell. I'm currently renovating it in an '80s and Memphis Milano / Miami Vice vibe.

The Instagram account is so fun. Your new house is also giving Hockney vibes... growing up, you had to learn how to maximize the little space that you had available to you. I see this in your compositions. Your canvases are filled to the brim with shapes, colors, symbols, and graphics. It's almost like you don't want to waste an inch. How do you choose the specific images or motifs to create these compositions?

I choose what I'm attracted to at the time. Right now, I'm into Crocs and showers and mushrooms. In my paintings, I continually add to the lexicon of images that I use. I have several images that keep coming back and others that I forget about.

You often focus on icons or products with playful and exciting branding. Is this true?

Yes and no. I make them interesting. I look for the most obvious, overlooked things and then make them funny or animated in my paintings. Other things are naturally interesting like Doritos or Capri Sun packaging.

I feel like "branding" is such a ubiquitous and over used term, what are your thoughts on personal branding, Instagram, etc.?

As an artist these days, I think that is what you're doing. Creating your own brand. Creating something instantly recognizable, so that when people see your work, they can say oh, "that's a Katherine Bernhardt."

I think you've achieved that, the work feels contemporary but also nostalgic. You paint characters like E.T., the Pink Panther, and Dr. Teeth. Why do you think you're drawn to incorporating this kind of imagery?

I always loved E.T. Other characters come from what I see around me, on TV or the internet, or from what my son watches on TV. The '80s are my favorite era. I love the colours and neon.

You said that painting “is a funny thing to do in 2022” and you think it’s “amazing that humans are still doing it.” Can you elaborate on this?

Just the act of doing something so primal. Holding a paintbrush and making a painting in this day and age of computers and technology. It’s funny to me. We are losing lots of craftspeople these days due to a lack of knowledge and skill not being passed down. I love painting.

I agree. Painting is such a seemingly antiquated mode of expression but is still so relevant and necessary. It’s ‘funny’ that humans still paint but it’s also quite beautiful. Speaking of funny, your work has a great sense of humor. You paint objects like toilet paper, cigarettes, Doritos, cartoon characters – stuff that you’ve said is ‘dumb.’ Do you think that this is you trying to subvert the pretentiousness of ‘art’ and the art world, or what ‘serious’ art is supposed to be?

Maybe. I just like to paint dumb things. I ask myself, ‘what is the most obvious thing I can paint?’ I try to figure out what I’m overlooking or what I can paint that would be funny.

Your work is refreshingly optimistic and positive in a time that feels very scary and negative. Especially in the U.S., we’re constantly bombarded with bad headline after bad headline. Do you see it as a sort of escapism? For yourself? For the viewer?

Yes, it is definitely art therapy. For people to be able to go and see art and not think about all the horrific things going on in the world is necessary. It’s important to see color and go to museums and see architecture and antiques and art to remember that we are human and that there is good in the world.

I love that. Can you tell me about your process?

I think of a general idea or combo of things that I want to make a painting about. Then, I draw it out in spray paint on canvas. I then put the canvas on the floor and paint on the floor.

We talked about letting diluted paint pool on the canvas on the floor, creating flowing forms of its own. What do you enjoy about, or gain from, letting paint act on its own in this way?

Yeah, I like to use a lot of water so that the paint pools and moves. I like the colours that blend and the mess that it makes.

You have an exhibition titled ‘*Why is a mushroom growing in my shower?*’ opening in June at David Zwirner in London. This is your first solo presentation with the gallery. Can you talk a little about the concept of the show and the experience of putting it together?

The idea came together when I had the models for the gallery at my studio. I already had an idea for the show but having the models of the gallery really helps in making the show come together as a cohesive body of work.

The paintings were mostly mushrooms and Crocs and showers, like tiles with different color grout. Bathrooms that I have designed myself here in my studio and storage buildings. The architecture of the bathrooms has come through in the paintings now. Then I started really mixing it up and having mushrooms grow out of tiles and crocs in the shower and mushroom Crocs and mushrooms taking a shower and just creating the mix of all of that. Adding to each new painting more and more. Mushrooms and crocs. The title of the show came last. It seemed fitting.

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Lastly, what is it about the act of creating that you love?

I love being alone in my studio listening to music and doing my own thing. I also love paint and making images. I like making stuff. I'm a busybody, I don't really like sitting down. I like to constantly work. I'm a workaholic and don't stop until I'm exhausted.