

Katherine Bernhardt

Product Recall: New Pattern Paintings

17 May – 18 June 2016

Xavier Hufkens is delighted to present an exhibition of Katherine Bernhardt's recent work.

Known for her large-scale pattern paintings depicting constellations of everyday items that have been isolated from their original context, American artist Katherine Bernhardt has created a new ensemble of colourful and dynamic images that take inspiration from both Brussels and New York. Executed in acrylic and spray paint on canvas, in a spontaneous and fluid style, her latest work features objects typically associated with Belgian popular culture, such as Smurfs and chocolate, with those representative of America, such as Lisa Simpson and Nike trainers. Added to the mix are domestic objects like toilet rolls and Windex (an American cleaning product); toucans and tropical fruits (a reference to the artist's frequent travels to Puerto Rico); iconic games from her teenage years during the early 1980s (Pac-Man and the Rubik's cube); and food and drink (Nutella, cigarettes, wine). Because of the myriad objects in her work, it is sometimes interpreted as a wry comment on consumerism. Yet this is not a conscious concern of the artist, who is primarily motivated by a fascination with her everyday surroundings, and in giving it expression through colour and composition.

When scrutinised carefully, Bernhardt's work offers up intriguing sets of tonal, temporal and formal correspondences: the yellow Pac-Men are the same colour as Lisa Simpson; the Smurfs and the Windex are an identical shade of blue; the facets of the Rubik's cube mirror the squares of chocolate; rectilinear black and white forms (cigarettes) are the antithesis, both literal and figurative, to the glowing, luscious fruits (papayas and kiwis); nature (toucans) counteracts the artificiality of consumer culture (Nike trainers); the cartoon characters belong to both the past and the present, to the old and the young. The clusters of objects in Bernhardt's work are deceptively simple but possessed of an associative power that is both intensely autobiographical yet improbably universal. By introducing objects from a bygone era into her paintings, however, they not only allude to popular culture but also to memory.

The origins of Bernhardt's graphic, pattern-based approach can be traced back to her early encounters with street graffiti and a distinctive type of African fabric that is made using a technique called 'Dutch wax printing' (and which, coincidentally, often contains unexpected combinations of objects). This material is widely available in Bernhardt's neighbourhood in Brooklyn and has been used as the foundation to her largest fabric collage to date, which is being exhibited for the first time. In this resonant and highly charged work, the artist juxtaposes her light-hearted nostalgia for the games of her youth, one of the dominant themes of her paintings, with potent symbols of contemporary geopolitics (images of President Obama, the hand of Fatima, mosques, talismans to ward off the curse of the Evil Eye). The piece also reflects Bernhardt's interest in the history of textiles and the American tradition of quilt making, more specifically the quilts that have been produced in the African-American hamlet of Gees Bend, Alabama, since the early nineteenth century, and to which her work shares a formal and emotional affinity. In the centre of the piece is an hourglass, which ties everything together, and links the various trans-historical and political aspects to a specific point in time, the here and the now.

Katherine Bernhardt (b. 1975, St Louis, Missouri) lives and works in New York. Recent solo exhibitions include *Pablo and Efrain, Venus Over Manhattan*, New York (2015) and *Fruit Salad, Venus Over Los Angeles, Los Angeles* (2015).