

ARTFORUM

CRITICS' PICKS NEW YORK ELLEN BERKENBLIT



ELLEN BERKENBLIT, WITCHING HOUR, 2016, OIL AND PAINT STICK ON LINEN, 63 1/2 X 77"

ANTON KERN GALLERY 16 East 55th Street May 25–July 7

Animated by frenzied bursts of vibrant color, splashing patterns, and succulent forms, Ellen Berkenblit's recent paintings capture moments of stillness in broad, energetic strokes. Through her sumptuous canvases, caked with creamy paint stick and occasionally bedecked with quilted calico fragments, we follow a scattered sequence of minutely shifting portraits: a beribboned bay pony moving restlessly between *Untitled* and *Lilac* (both 2016); a massive outstretched hand with Kool Aid–hued nails trying to pinch a tulip-like flower (*Alef Bet*, 2016, and *Witching Hour*, 2017); and a woman with an almost toothless grin meeting the surprised gaze of a bird (*Scruffs*, 2016).

Her works are made and hung with filmic repetition—it feels as though we are experiencing a slideshow interspersed with the white of gallery walls. Berkenblit's characters are in some kind of luxurious state of deceleration: Fingers subtly reach and retract; a horse gently backs away and approaches. Berkenblit's execution—by turns languidly graphic and emphatically expressive—further confuses this temporality. The movements from a cartoon version of Manet's *Olympia in V*, 2017, are infinitely protracted by the weight of heavy outlines and her grayish-pink coloration, while in *I Don't Object If You Call Collect*, 2017, the sleepiness of lowered lashes is shaken by the energetic designs of a patchwork background. Playing her mark-making against the elusive narratives of her subjects, Berkenblit tests the supremacy of content over form, suffusing instances of quiet with a sense of imminence and possibility.

— Nicole Kaack