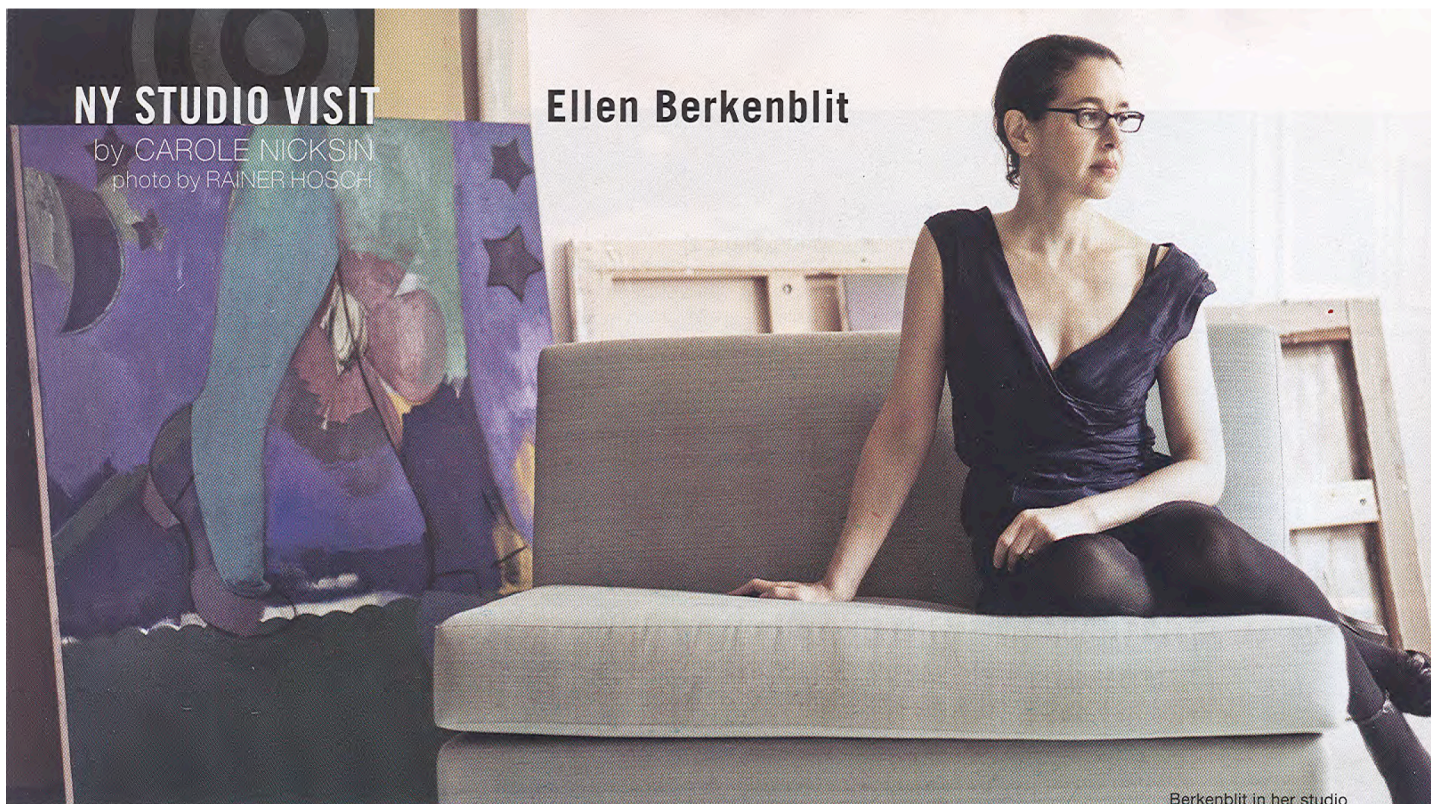


NY STUDIO VISIT

by CAROLE NICKSIN
photo by RAINER HOSCH

Ellen Berkenblit



Berkenblit in her studio

In an imaginary neighborhood of art, Ellen Berkenblit's work resides somewhere down the street from abstract expressionist Clyfford Still, just around the corner from "Nancy" comic strip creator Ernie Bushmiller.

Combining two disparate styles, Berkenblit's exquisitely simple cartoon drawings of a girl (who bears a caricature-like resemblance to the artist), sometimes with a cat, a bear or a tiger, are set against a full-on, paint-for-painting's-sake abstract backdrop. Depending on which phase the work is from, the palette can be either exploding with color or Franz Kline-style black-and-white.

"I'm not a figurative painter. It's the application of paint I'm concerned with. I like mixing paint," said Berkenblit. Still, it's the figure that grabs the viewer's attention first, seducing you into the canvas. "The girl" serves as the entry point for the painter, too. "She is really my beginning armature to get to the paint and the line. Someone might say, get rid of the girl and get to the abstraction, but I like the whole process. All the footsteps amuse me. I want them to be there."

Berkenblit stood in her bright white studio in Gowanus, Brooklyn, black hair pulled back tight, lips pursed, eyes wide and playful. It was early summer, and she had only moved into the space a few weeks prior. During the months she was in between studios, she satisfied her need to work with small black-and-white drawings of the girl

and her creature friends. Now, the artist was brimming with pent-up energy, like a pup that has been cooped up too long. Already there were half a dozen paintings in the works.

"It was like I was starving and I had to reconnect with everything having to do with painting," said Berkenblit, who racks up studio hours like an hourly worker eager for overtime. Nearly everyday, you can find her duking it out with her canvases. "It's part of needing to invent and go to the unknown," she said. "To really know yourself is to not really know what you're doing. The closest I feel to myself is when I find something new."

Berkenblit grew up in Westchester County, NY, one of four children. Her father was a chemist and amateur photographer who used a half-bath as a darkroom. "That was a big influence for me," Berkenblit said. "He was practical and he loved materials." She graduated from Cooper Union and has been showing her work in New York City and beyond since the 1980s. She is currently represented by Anton Kern Gallery.

Six weeks after my first visit, Berkenblit invited me back to the studio. I arrived to find that things had changed significantly. The girl and her creatures were still lurking in some of the work, but were no longer ubiquitous. In their place were legs — some coming, but mostly going. In contrast to the separate-but-equal relationship between the figures and the abstraction in Berkenblit's previous work, these new paintings are harmonious.

"I'm always thinking about edge and color-against-color on the canvas. The leg is all about edge."

Elegant curves of the leg give the work a more overt sensuality. "Eroticism is in everything, and so is a comical aspect," Berkenblit surmised. "The comical aspect makes the eroticism seem incongruous." These works balance the two elements, with a different female figure making a debut. "I was thinking of her (the new female image) as being like an ad or a billboard of a woman. So it's almost like what a cartoon would look like to 'the girl'."

A large canvas, about 5-foot tall, featuring the back of two legs in luscious purple — one center stage, the other mostly obscured — against a green-on-green background seemed to epitomize the new direction. "I just physically threw myself into it. I didn't know what it was going to look like," Berkenblit says. "It's the most abstract while keeping legs in there. You can look at it and absorb it without really pinning it down."

The new studio seems to have invigorated Berkenblit, so much so that finishing the paintings seems to be her biggest hurdle. "Sometimes I trick myself into thinking I'm finished with a painting," she says. "I tell myself I'm tired and I'm just going home for the day. I don't like to finish them. I like it when they are finished, but thinking, 'Oh, I'm going to finish this now.' What a mood killer! I have to just paint, and not think I'm painting to finish this." ☺