

Why Is Hip Young Painter Allison Schulnik So Obsessed With Cats? A Q&A



by Scott Indrisek

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The 21st-century belongs to the cat. They already own the Internet and its lolz, an entire subdivision of street art is devoted to their graphic representation (with or without lasers shooting out of their eyes), and now felines seem to be colonizing contemporary art galleries as well. Recently a flurry of New York shows have celebrated the cat, including Urs Fischer and Cassandra MacLeod's familial turn at Gavin Brown's Enterprise and Kristen Schiele at Freight + Volume.

And then there is **Allison Schulnik's** oil-thick exhibition at ZieherSmith Gallery, which features multiple paintings of felines (and one sculpture.) We spoke with the Los Angeles-based artist about her artistic cat fancy.

Do you remember the first time you drew or painted a cat?

When I was 13 or so and saw what Picasso had painted when he was my age, I decided I really needed to get good fast. So I started by drawing seven things over and over again: crumpled up hand towels, flowers, myself, my parents, the beach, the alleys around town, and cats. I have pages and pages in notebooks, hundreds of cat drawings. In my later teenage years I moved to mushrooms, dancers, medieval castles, psychedelic abstractions, and sexy superhero cat-women. So I always was working with cats, I guess. And I never stopped drawing and painting cats from life.

What drew you so strongly to your feline subjects?

I liked that they constantly moved, so it was always a game to get this quick little gesture in the right way. Plus they are so elegant and mysterious, and gracious like dancers. There is always so much twist and bend in their positions. It's like they were made to be placed in an image. My house was a bit of a cat crack house. They moved in and out, usually based on how much bacon and cheese they got, which was a lot. So there were always new ones to draw. They squatted where they pleased, and never really got kicked out. Sometimes their family members would come looking for them there, only to be turned away by the head of the house. They definitely own the house to this day.

How is painting a cat different than painting a human being?

It's the same thing in a lot of ways. I want to get across that same kind of dignity and grace. Except when I don't. Which isn't often the case when painting cats. They are always dignified. I guess sometimes my humanlike figures are more catlike, and my cats more humanlike.

You also paint quite a few clowns. They're obviously a divisive subject — both a symbol of childhood innocence and fun, but also inexplicably sinister to some people, myself included. Do cats have a similarly divided nature?

I'm sure there are people who fear cats. Some people feel they have a sixth sense. Some people think they have nine lives. Some people think they suffocate you when you sleep. Some people think they ruled the world before humans, and just gave it all up to lounge about and make us their slaves. People don't keep clowns around the house, let them sit on their laps and lick their noses. So until that happens I think there will be fewer people who fear cats than clowns. But cats definitely have the ability to cause discomfort in a sinister way. They are incredibly smart and controlling. They roam the night, feed on vermin, can be as quiet as silence, move like a ghost or a shape-shifter, and strike like a snake. Yet at the same time they seduce you with their beauty and cuteness.

Which other painters do you admire who have used the cat as a subject?

Some of my favorite cats are in Balthus's paintings. "The Room" from 1952 is probably one of my all-time favorite paintings, especially because of the cat's role in that painting. Also I love the "Cat in the Mirror" series, "The King of the Cats" and "Young Girl with Cat," all by Balthus. Rousseau also has some amazing cat paintings. And of course Jean-Baptiste Oudry is one of my favorite cat painters, with masterpieces like "Two Cats" from 1725 and "The Monkey and the Cat" series of drawings and paintings. Really most of the greatest figurative painters have used cats at one point or another in a brilliant way. There's Goya's "Boy with Cats," and Rembrandt's "Old Woman at Prayer," also favorites of mine. "In Den Krallen" by Alfred Kubin, "Wounded Lion" by Raden Sjarief Bustaman Saleh, and "A Boy and a Girl With a Cat and an Eel" by Judith Leyster. I guess you can tell I am excited about cats in painting. I also have a good collection of cat paintings and sculptures I've found by anonymous artists over the years, at flea markets and such. Last year scientists found this temple dedicated to the Egyptian cat goddess Bastet, and there were 600 cat statues in there. I really want to see them.

How many cats do you have personally? Are the animals that appear in your paintings your own?

I have two cats, Gin and Juice. I have at least 20 portraits of Gin from the last 10 years. She is one half of twin Siamese mutt runts. She is often the punching bag for her sister, and I have always felt she needed multiple monuments to her, in canvas and clay. I have painted Juice as well, but since Juice is the all-loved charmer in life, the one with the soft fur — not coarse like Gin's — and the one with the confident, seductive, slutty blue eyes that garners her all the petting from guests — not corneas that carry complete terror and panic in them at all times, like Gin's — and the one with a cappuccino color fade of deep brown to white, with a little Marilyn Monroe birthmark on her upper lip — not a face resembling death itself, with markings around her eyes that look skeletal, like Gin's — I don't paint Juice as much.

I have painted most of my cats from childhood, Boochie, Tympanee, et cetera. In my show up at ZieherSmith right now I painted Dempster, one of my many felines, whom we found in a dumpster as children. Also in this show was one of my mother's multiple homeless cats that come and go. She just called her Mother Cat because she was shy and had babies. I called that portrait of her and her two kittens "Hobo Cat Family." And my friend's two cats are also featured in "Rhys Johnson Koh," and "Cat Head" (that cat is named Miggy Littleton.) Rhys was known as somewhat of a wizard, and also recently passed away after 20 happy, hairless years. Another friend referred to him as the "mini horse wizard."