

On the Edge of the Mystical with Cindy Bernard

ON THE EDGE OF THE MYSTICAL: INTERVIEW WITH CINDY BERNARD BY CHRISTINA NAFZIGER

Cindy Bernard's paintings are filled with mystery, darkness, intrigue, and a dash of humor. She describes her paintings as dreamlike with transcendent-like qualities. Each scene appears to be on the cusp of something mystical, with dramatic magenta lighting and indigo shadows as if on the edge of dusk, on the brink of something supernatural. The artist beautifully and skillfully creates haunting interior scenes with an air of the gothic, with candles burning and smoke sifting through the night air. And in the air, it feels like anything is possible, like that moment just after midnight where suddenly the mood shifts to the unexpected and almost magical.

Bernhard's stunning interiors often showcase wide-eyed cats (or dogs)—what she explains are stand-ins for people. Each object and animal are carefully placed, pulling the viewer in to another world. In this interview, the artist tells us about the inspiration behind her imagery, her routine in her studio, and the existential questions that inform her gorgeous work.

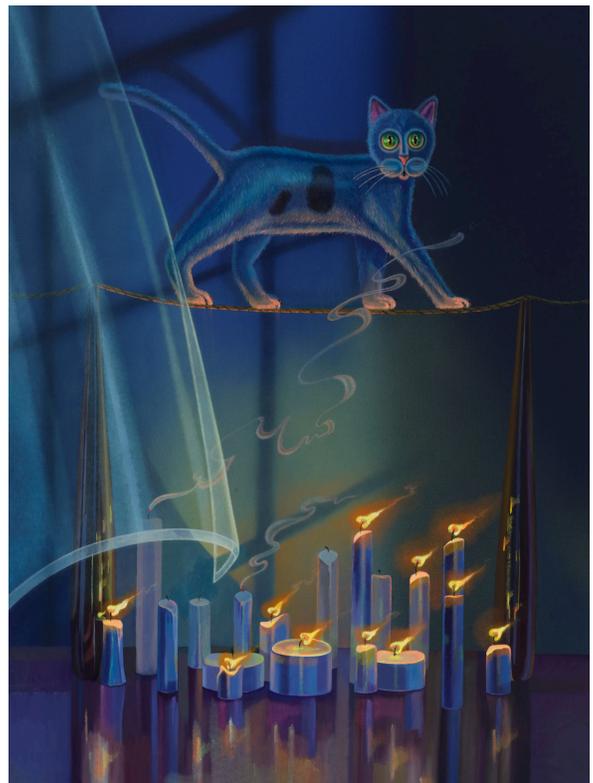
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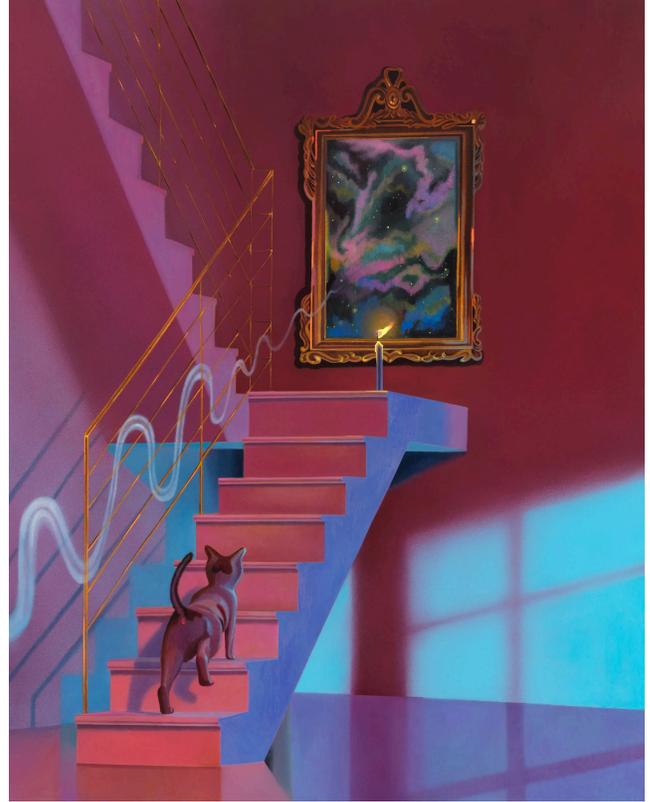
You have such a distinct style—was this formed during your time studying art? How did that experience affect your approach to art making?

During grad school I did a lot of experimenting to find what suited me best, I even tried becoming a non-objective painter for a little bit! My style didn't really develop until 2020. I remember making my first cat painting and things really clicked; it was the first painting I made that felt truly 'me'. Once I made that piece, I started to get a lot of eyes on my work and I remember my core group of painting friends saying, 'wow this new body of work is so YOU'. But this took years of consistent painting and trying lots of different things. I think to one's own voice it takes years of painting and dedication.

What about domestic interiors inspires you as a subject?

I use domestic interiors as a setting for the dramas of human existence. I spend a lot of time at home, and minimally decorated interiors have been a way for me to contemplate and explore the idea of ritual space and meditation.





There are a few objects that tend to show up repeatedly in your paintings, such as cats, candles, and smoke. Can you talk about these elements and what continues to draw you to them?

Cats (and recently dogs) are a stand in for humans in my work. I used to paint the human figure, but I found that when I switched to animals it became easier for myself and viewers to empathize and relate to the subject matter. Painting animals also adds an element of humor and creates a stage for comedic relief. The candles and smoke are important imagery from my childhood. As a kid I spent a lot of time in the Catholic church with my family and I have always been mesmerized by the abundance of candles, smoke, and incense that surrounded me as a kid. I think this imagery has been ingrained in my mind and has found its way into my work. It is also a formal play between solid shapes and transparency.

The hues and lighting in your painting create such a specific atmosphere and vibe. How would you describe the mood of your paintings?

The moods that I try to convey in my work are dreamlike, otherworldly, mystical, and possibly transcendence. I have always been interested in mystics and I often dwell on questions regarding existence. What happens after this life? Is there a way to find peace and transcendence in this world? What is the purpose of human existence? The big questions!



Do you have a routine in your studio? What do you do to get you in the mood and mindset to create your art?

I keep a disciplined studio schedule. Most days I wake up at 5 am and try to get in the studio by 7 am. I work Monday - Friday, 7 am to at least 5 pm. I don't believe in waiting to get in the mood to create work, I think one must be creating consistently in order to see results and further their practice. Like Jerry Saltz always says, "Get to work!!!"

Who or what are some of your biggest influences?

I am influenced by everything: films, poetry, and my day-to-day life. My two favorite painters are Morandi and Lisa Yuskavage. Two filmmakers that inspire my work most are Andrei Tarkovsky and Terrence Malick.

I first saw your paintings in person at an incredible show in Chicago at the Ukrainian Museum of Modern Art. Are you from Chicago originally? If not, what brought you here and what keeps you here?

I grew up on a pig farm an hour south of Chicago. I moved to California in my 20s to go to graduate school, but I am close with my family and knew I would always come back to Illinois. If I were to move anywhere else it would be New York, but right now I am content in Chicago. I am a midwest girl at heart!

I have to ask—is the cat in your paintings your own cat?

Haha! I am actually very allergic to cats! I find them to be mysterious and sneaky...and because of this they were the perfect vehicle for my work. I am currently doing a series with dogs, and I am excited to share them when the time comes.